

Chapter V

Negotiating Infant Death

"No single vision can account for everything...All grammars leak"

Trawick 1990:200.

Maria is a girl of about fifteen who left the village of Kuliama to board at the Catholic Ashram and attend high school in Wamena. She got pregnant and had a baby girl. Not only did she not go through the *hotalimo*, a ceremony signaling that a girl's menstrual cycle has begun, but she did not even marry through the region-wide *epe ago* festival held every five years. To add insult to injury, her soon-to-be husband Fredy made no arrangements with his potential in-laws to marry Maria and to arrange to pay the brideprice payment that they set.

Once the baby was born Fredy did set off and try and gather together the money, or to call in obligations, to line up the five pigs needed for the brideprice. Since he was young, and did not have the full support of his parents, whose generosity can make first marriage payments relatively easy for a youth, he came back empty-handed. The child got sick and Maria brought the baby to her parents where they performed a healing ritual. There was no need to seek medicine because all involved knew why the baby got sick. Maria's parents were ashamed because *adat* was never completed, and "when we are ashamed like this, all kinds of things can go wrong: the birth can be difficult, the child might be born defective, the mother could die or get a sickness, the baby can die, or someone else in the family could die. So every family has to make sure that the *adat* is all ready before the woman gives birth."

Maria's baby died, to the surprise of no one, about six weeks after birth because, according to everyone I talked to, Maria and Fredy broke too many ritual codes: "the child died because *adat* was not ready. If *adat* is not ready the child can get sick, the child can die." A teenage friend of Maria's linked the infant's death to ritual actions: "she was still a girl, never made a woman, and so the baby died. Fredy never paid his brideprice, and so the baby died." Maria searched for an etiology: "She got *sakit kepala* (headache), her body was all hot and her head throbbed at the temples. The ancestors in their anger shot at her with an arrow which pierced the veins inside the baby and made blood go everywhere inside the baby's body. Blood fills up the head and the baby dies. The situation is hopeless.

This chapter extends arguments set out in chapter 4 about fixed and variable qualities of the infant body. In a study of local analysis of the very young, I distinguished between qualities of the infant body that fall into the realm of the certain (the placenta,

the regularities of the birth process) and qualities that remain uncertain, conditional, and variable. These include growth, health, and deviations from locally understood patterns of normalcy. In this chapter, I look exclusively at qualities of the infant that fall into the realm of the uncertain and show through tales of infant death how interpretations of misfortune remain strongly grounded in these uncertain aspects of infant growth. As in the above tale of Fredy and Maria, where the infant's sickly state validated local understandings about ancestors, Dani men and women constantly seek indications of broader political realities in the infant's development.

I argue that an effective way to understand the intersections between the infant body, politics, and local interpretations of infant death is through the power of talk. This focus on words and silences complements the argument of Nations and Rebhun (1988) that there are many factors that affect how parents cope with infant death. To disease patterns, healers, beliefs about life and death, religion, emotions and affection, I add the power of talk. In the above tale, Maria and Fredy did not come to the conclusion that ancestors shot their child with an arrow all by themselves. Judgments about the infant death were *negotiated* among close kin, and were confirmed not only through knowledge of malevolent ancestors but also by Maria and Fredy's failure to conform to norms of comportment.

One way certain events come to be seen as the cause for infant deaths is through cultural practices that coerce and control. In this chapter, I focus on "local systems of knowledge embedded within particular institutional hierarchies and production processes" (Young 1993:118), ideological systems that serve important interests and that work as a tool to "subvert or devalue rival ideas" (Young 1993:116). In the Baliem valley, I have already discussed how marriage patterns, division of labour, and bodily understandings can be seen as cosmologies partially defined and reinforced by men. In this chapter, I show the role these cosmologies and institutions play in assigning meaning to infant well-being. However, I also show how these definitions do not attain the status

of unquestioned truths through mere pronouncements by male leaders about causes of infant death. Explanations and understanding come, in great part, through negotiations about what makes up the ingredients of an event.

Dani society is one where talk makes power (Brison 1992; Brown 1995). Avoiding the word "decision", which connotes actions taken by a single person, I argue that infants in the Baliem valley are the recipients of "judgments," ones made up by others through words, through analyses of actions, and through gossip. Judgments about infant life and death are "local, contradictory, and fragmented" (Lutz and Abu-Lughod 1990:10; Brison 1992). Judgments become local "truths" in a manner consistent with the acts of "discourse" in the Foucauldian sense as "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (Foucault cited in Lutz and Abu-Lughod 1990:10). Talk about babies occurs within the arena of emotional discourses; that is, ways of talking that are "pragmatic acts and communicative performances" (Lutz & Abu-Lughod 1990:11). The accumulation of words, however, ultimately forms locally believable realities and these tend to reinforce existing relations of power and inequality (Watson-Gegeo 1990; Atkinson 1989; Brison 1992; Bledsoe 1993; Battaglia 1995a). In short, talk about infant life and death constructs and reinforces Dani ideals and behaviour.

The following stories show how infants exist at a site of evolving meanings and how health outcomes are negotiated outcomes. In focusing on individual tales about babies and the ways actions are perceived by others, I highlight the context-heavy nature of decisions made about babies. In placing emphasis on interpretations of a baby's physiology, I describe what the Dani rely on as one key source of decision-making. Finally, in focusing on mortality and abandonment (versus tales of stability and prosperity), I show that infancy is a time of contested meanings about person, gender, and family. I focus on infant death in order to show the power of words, of antagonisms, and of inequalities in shaping the intense and meaningful debates over the difficult, emotional, and potentially fractious reality of frequent infant death.

At no point do I consider that I have done justice to the range of forceful emotions that women and men say they experience upon the death of a child. Death wrenches people from their daily routines and Dani lament the death of infants as deeply as those of adults. Death can also be difficult to talk about, and I acknowledge the exceptional effort that the women and men I interviewed made to talk to me about this topic. However, I work against the notion that an emotional response to death is somehow a more meaningful arena for inquiry than one that examines the complexity of social relations surrounding death (cf. Scheper-Hughes 1992).

By focusing on social relations, I challenge the merit of the hypothesis held in health transition theory and in the work of some anthropologists that people will be more likely to care diligently for their children if they come to expect that the children will survive (Scheper-Hughes 1987a, 1987b; Imhof 1985; DeMause 1974; UNICEF n.d.; cf. Chen et al. 1995). Emotional relations falter or take root depending on demographic realities, the argument goes, and these scholars "infer changes in sentiments and cultural conceptions from alterations in demographic patterns" (Yanagisako 1979:181). Having children that stay alive supposedly allow parents and communities to imbue children with a new, more loving meaning. The work of Scheper-Hughes provides a clear example of this type of argument:

Parents in much of the so-called developing world...understand a baby's life to be a provisional and undependable things - a candle whose flame is as likely to flicker or go out as to burn brightly and continually. There, child death may be interpreted less as a tragedy than as a misfortune, one to be accepted with equanimity and resignation as an unalterable fact of human existence. (Scheper-Hughes 1987a:2)

If this were true, in the Baliem valley where infant mortality sits at 280 deaths per 1000 live births, we should expect a high degree of resignation, passivity, and disinterest in coming to terms with death through negotiated explanations. Yet this is manifestly not the case. Even when a lot of infants die, Dani attribute meaning to the event (see Greenhalgh 1995; Nations & Rebhun 1988). Large-scale funerals are held, parents

mourn, and close kin lament the loss. This chapter focuses on the experiences of three Dani women to show the importance of constructed and contested relationships between the infant body and politics of household and community.

The Death of Hermina's Baby

Although I had seen Hermina Kossay working the village gardens and smoking cigarettes at the bridge where the taxis stopped on their way to Wamena, we did not have the chance to speak until her new husband Julianus, a village officer⁴⁹, entrusted her to open up the village office for me one day in December. She was impressed that I, a woman, could simply ask her husband for the office keys, unlock cabinets, and take out whatever papers I wanted. Since Hermina calls herself a modern woman and wants to live the part, she stuck close to me after that in hopes of learning as much from me as I was planning to learn from her. She is not one to trust others easily, however, and only told me her life story in bits and pieces over the next two months. Her hovering husband Julianus jealously guarded her from picking up too many of my "modern" ways by curtailing the amount of time she was allowed to spend with me. However, we got along well and often sought out each other's company when Julianus was working. Hermina was young, energetic, newly married, and determined to maintain her current influential status as Julianus's favorite wife.

In the following edited transcripts from fieldnotes, Hermina revealed bits of herself in small packages. As will soon become obvious, Hermina re-invented and opened herself up for me each time that we talked:

Yes I ran away twice, once from my first husband Otober Hilapok to Julianus Meaga, and once back from Julianus to Otober. I married Otober when I

⁴⁹The government office employed four people: one village head; one secretary; one development officer; and one treasurer. The head and secretary enjoy higher wages (about \$15 per month) than did Julianus (about \$10 per month). These positions confer high status and potential access to more lucrative government programmes.

was not yet menstruating and we were married for a long time. We have a girl, Juli, who is school age (about seven). But Otober never worked, he was hardly ever home, never works in the gardens, and he gambles away all his money. He has *kepala judi* (gambling head) and can gamble up to 100,000 rupiah (\$50 US). Benjamin (the head of the compound where she stayed) said I shouldn't stay with Otober. Since Benjamin had been buddying up with Julianus for awhile, helping him with a garden and once giving him a pig, Benjamin suggested I go with Julianus, so I walked out of the house one day and stood just outside the compound beside Julianus. Otober saw us from inside the cookhouse and he knew I was running away. And so I changed husbands. But Julianus took too much time to pay the brideprice that he owed for me to Otober's family. So I ran back to Otober. Then Julianus paid up pretty quick.

Now I live with Julianus in his new house by the bridge. His two other wives stay in the compound in the back by the river. He won't let them stay with us in the new house. My daughter stays with her grandmother in the old compound with Benjamin. My mother looks after my daughter; it's normal. I look after Juli too; I bring her bits of pork and food and I get her clothes and my mother and Juli come to the new house to visit me here. I'm scared to go to the old house because if Otober sees me there he'll have such a rage in his heart that he might attack me with a knife and kill me. He would be too mad to control himself. Julianus knows this so he has forbidden me to go to my old house anymore.

In this first conversation, Hermina reviews a marriage pattern common to contemporary Dani women. Married young through the regional feast, she was married to a man her parents approved of because he came from a family with whom they had good relations. Even though she didn't have a good marriage, she didn't leave until another situation offered itself that looked more promising. In this case, the act of leaving was orchestrated by Benjamin who was able to solidify a profitable relationship with Julianus through Hermina's marriage to him. Since Julianus' house was close by, Hermina did not feel too badly leaving Juli behind as she knew it would not be too difficult to see her often. It is not appropriate for Juli to accompany her mother to her new home. Juli's blood is that of her father. Julianus, her step-father, and her father Otober are expected to hate each other because both once had the same wife and furthermore because they come from traditionally warring clans. Julianus therefore cannot be trusted to look after Juli, to feed her or to love her as Hermina would like him to: "if he fed her the food would become dry and she would get sick," Hermina said. When Juli visits her mother at her new home she does so carefully, mostly when Julianus is not around.

The second time that Hermina told me her life story was when I was in Benjamin's compound with Benjamin's wife, Lina Matuan. Hermina had seen me head into the compound and crept in after me, quietly and nervously, and said she wanted to talk with us, but could we please talk anywhere but there? The three of us sat on some dried grass under a tree near the road to Wamena, smoking cigarettes, open to stares but far from prying ears. This is how she retold her story the second time:

Everyone said I was really beautiful when I was young. Otober had a guitar and a radio and a lot of promises that he would pay my brideprice of three pigs but he was just so lazy that his parents didn't even want to help him raise the brideprice. He just likes to *jalan jalan* (walk and walk). When Juli was born I got help and food from all his relatives but nothing from Otober. And he never paid the brideprice properly. After a while I brought the baby down here to Benjamin's place and I raised her alone, she walked alone.

Then Otober came back into my life when Juli had stopped breastfeeding and he wanted to fool around again. A woman is too full of *nafsu* (desire) to say "no" so we fooled around and I got pregnant and I couldn't have an abortion because God watches us and would make me suffer. After eight months I sat down and all this blood came out and I was sick, sick, and Lina Matuan stood behind me and grabbed my waist and squeezed and the baby and the placenta all came out in one big whoosh. But the baby was very small, not healthy, it got sick with a cold, it coughed, coughed for one month and then it died. After it died Otober heard about it and he came back. Benjamin told him to get a big pig for the funeral but he could only find a small one. The day the funeral was over I ran away."

In this second retelling Hermina adds the information that Otober never paid her brideprice and that she had a second child that died shortly before she left Otober for the more prosperous Julianus. Not paying the brideprice, especially when it was set at such a low rate, reflects poorly on Otober. If his parents did not want to help him out it reflects even more poorly. What with Otober's "gambling head" and his frequent absences Hermina had indeed made a sorry match and she appears to have had a harder time than many women of her generation.

In the third retelling, a couple of months later, Julianus had relaxed his hold on Hermina somewhat as he felt less threatened by my influence. He allowed me to go with her to her resting spot under the bridge where she bathes and washes her clothes. We sat

on the rocks and watched the river go by as she retold her story a third time. This time, the emotional struggles she went through in talking out her tale were plain to see on her face.

When Otober came and took me away I was crazy about him. But I've figured out he can't stop gambling, he plays around all the time, he can't be free from gambling, he walks about thinking about gambling all the time. But what was good about him was that he let me be free at parties. I could go to whatever event I wanted to and he wouldn't follow me. It was easy for me to fool around, but he would also go away and not come back for two or three months. He was never any help with the baby, but what else is new?

When Juli was four, I stopped breastfeeding. After that I got pregnant with the second baby, Agustinus. He died when he was three days old. He was almost *lahir mati* (born dead) and so he died very fast. I was sad because at first when the baby was born I didn't feel warm towards him but after a bit I loved him a lot. I was sad when he died. But if there is no hope you have to let the baby die. Once he died and the funeral was over I ran away to Julianus.

Julianus is very strict. He never lets me go anywhere without him, not even to the gardens. He says once I have a child I can go freely, but without a child it's not possible. I have a lot of admirers, at least twenty men from all over the valley want me to run away with them, but since I never get to go anywhere anymore I stay at home and I'm faithful to Julianus. He loves me, I can tell, he can't get me out of his mind. But he pays for this: I get soap, clothes, and lots of cigarettes because he knows if I'm not happy I can run away in a flash. He has to pay, it's the new standard. Before a woman stayed unless her husband didn't pay the brideprice. Now if Julianus doesn't give me any money why then I'll just run away!

Two new and important pieces of information surface from this telling: first, Hermina had engaged in extramarital activities while under Otober's lax supervision; and second, her second child is now described as having been extremely weak at birth and dying within three days of being born. On the first point, Hermina's activities colour other people's perceptions of her. As the village head said of his duties in adjudicating runaway wife complaints: "if a woman runs away once, maybe twice then I'll listen to her and maybe let her live with the new man she's chosen; but if she runs away all the time, fools around, never stays still, then I'll just tell her to go back to the man she's got and to stop making such a fuss." Hermina would fall into the latter category. Behaviour of this type is subject to gossip and sanctions.

On the second point, the inconsistency of Hermina's story suggests that the matter of infant birth and death is flexible. There is no question that the baby was born and died, but in what condition, how long he lived, and why he died are matters up for conjecture and depend very much on who you speak to and what motives they might have for saying what they say.

Tactics of Silence

Which story is true? Or, which story is more true than the others? There is little doubt that context--talking to the white outsider anthropologist--coloured how Hermina told her story and perhaps led her always to hold back details. Hermina wanted me to feel empathy and friendship towards her, and while I did, she may have felt safer hiding the parts of her life that locals judge others negatively by, such as extramarital relations, running away, and having a child that died. Brison (1992) shows how political realities in Melanesia are built up not just from action but from talk about them (see also Brown 1995; Strathern 1971). Gossip performs an important function in confirming the legitimacy or otherwise of a particular person's claim to status. This process is particularly well-documented for male Melanesian leaders but has been less discussed with regard to women. For Hermina as for other women, actions get interpreted in light of valued norms; norms that are defined and controlled by men.

Women's reputations revolve around whether or not a woman is seen to be a "good wife and mother." For example, gossip about the daughter of a high-ranking tribal chief who has married an equally important man tends to be milder than that directed towards Hermina, a woman whose lineage is unexceptional and who has broken ideal norms of female conduct. Women compare themselves to the ideal of a "good wife and mother" that came up in countless conversations with women and men when they responded to questions such as "what are a woman's responsibilities?", "what does a man

look for in a wife?", and finally, bowing to the obvious, "what does it take to be a good wife and mother?" The ideal "good wife," according to all but the most urbane Wamena youth, marries within the *pesta perkawinan* ritual, marries young, doesn't have sexual relations with anyone but her husband, provides food for her husband, and works hard in the garden. A good wife will also maintain equanimous relations with her co-wives and will contribute food or a bit of baby-sitting to a co-wife in need. The idealized "good mother" produces nothing but large babies at regular six-year intervals, at least one of which is male, and all of whom live. A good mother would never have sex with her husband or with any other man while she was breastfeeding because the sperm might contaminate the breast milk and make her child sick. A good mother always has lots of breast milk, no matter her age, and keeps the child away from dangerous spirits and from high-risk places.

According to Dani accounts, a "bad mother" becomes so because of personality (*netai-egen weyak*), ancestor relations, and conduct. While some women have evil ancestors who control their actions, when I asked women to talk about "bad mothers" that they had known or heard of, personality, actions, and attitude were the main traits listed. When I asked a woman to describe a "bad mother," she spontaneously described Hermina, without knowing that I had already heard Hermina's version of her baby's death:

She's (Hermina) the kind of woman who runs away. She had a girl who was okay but then she had a boy who died. She gave milk to the baby all right but she didn't look after the baby at all. Right after she died she ran away and left the only daughter behind with her grandmother. A woman can be a bad mother when she's in a bad situation--maybe the baby will fall and die and then she can run away. I'm not saying that's what happened, but that's what we mean around here by a bad mother.

This woman is intimating that deliberate neglect of a baby is precisely the kind of behaviour that a selfish, loose woman would act out in her search to get what she wants. At the same time this woman doesn't say specifically and with finality that Hermina

killed or neglected her baby or that it was entirely Hermina's fault, but she plays on the power of gossip to intimate such a possibility.

A classic "bad mother" is one who abandons her child while still actively breastfeeding. Bety's tale was told to me several times as an example of the worst form of mothering. Briefly, Bety had run from one husband back to another several times, and had in-between engaged in sexual relations with two other men in the hopes of marrying them as well. She had two children by her first husband Tadeus and an illegitimate child by one of her lovers. This child was accepted by her second husband Markus as his own. Bety ran from her first husband to her second when her second child was only ten months old. As the oft-told story goes, late one night when they were on their way up the hill, Bety asked her first husband to hold the baby while she went into the bushes to relieve herself. Tadeus stood in the rain for about 20 minutes, holding the screaming child until he realized that Bety wasn't coming back and that she had run away to another man. After consulting with his parents and elders he gave the child to his brother. He felt vindicated in doing so once he found out that she had become pregnant by a third man while still married to her new husband.

With Hermina and Bety, local assessments of deviant behaviour find confirmation in the physical status of their offspring. According to Bety's vexed first husband, his abandoned daughter became "skinny very fast" and would not "grow well because her mother abandoned her." In other stories of this nature that I heard, such an act usually is remembered as causing death or at least producing a very skinny and sickly child. For example, I heard conflicting descriptions of Hermina's baby; some said he was tiny, others described him as a little bit smaller than average, and he was normal size said others. Those who wished to label Hermina a "bad mother" said her baby was average and that she neglected him until he became skinny; those who were her friends said he was "tiny and sickly" due to the actions of her husband.

In many cases, criteria of size, growth, and normalcy are used as measures by which to judge the parents. Babies are used as creative and malleable symbols for locally relevant criteria. In one extravagant tale, a barren Western Dani woman in a jealous frenzy came to Kuliama and stole three babies. Even though she thought she could feed the infants with formula they still became sick and died and so did she immediately afterwards. According to Dani practice, none but close female relatives can feed the baby because other people's breast milk makes the baby sick. The moral of this tale is not just that it is wrong to steal babies but that a baby will physically thrive only when in the company of his mother or her nearest relatives. One earnest Catholic woman stated that mother and father can cause an infant's death;

If either mother or father is careless, the baby can die right away. If a woman is eager to marry again and she doesn't want her kid she can be careless with food and milk; she wants to marry another man, but the child wants to drink too, she gives the baby food that is not good, and then she is free she can run. If both are careless then there is no hope; a man forgets to do his *adat* or is lazy and doesn't do his *adat* then there is no way to stop a death; the baby falls in the middle.

Hermine's slow revelation of her story and her unwillingness to ascribe a physical status to her child serves in part to protect her from accusations of bad mothering and neglect such as the ones stated in the above generalization. As a woman who has run away, who seeks the "modern," and who has had a dead child, she skirts around the edges of condemnation and is wise to watch her words.

On Infanticide and Women's Silences

People make conscious decisions about reproduction. A clear indication of this is the presence of abortion, contraception or infanticide in almost, if not all, human populations (Scrimshaw 1984). For any of these to take place, a person must take action to bring them about. As McDowell (1988) comments, it is not the rate of success that is relevant but the intent. In her analysis of the New Guinea ethnographic record, McDowell (1988) outlines explanations that have dominated the literature explaining

why infanticide is practiced in many Melanesian societies: women desire fewer children than men; the health of the living children supersedes concern for the newborn; women seek to avoid the pain of childbirth; women dislike rearing children; and women seek to avoid being under the control of their husbands too early on in their marriages (McDowell 1988; see also Scrimshaw 1983). In another New Guinea example, Schiefenhövel's (1989;1984) showed that infanticide in the 1970s among a remote pygmy population in the Star Mountains of Irian Jaya was a common and unproblematic means of limiting population growth in a marginal environment. Decisions grounded in "cultural" practice included extramarital pregnancies, sex preference, malformed newborn, sufficient children, and too small a time lag between children. These descriptive summaries by Schiefenhövel and McDowell privilege the mother as the "decision-maker" in acts of "infanticide" and downplay issues of power and politics that are being acted out at a local level.

Did Hermina ignore her infant son and let him die? At one level, Hermina's actions make easy sense. She was in a bad marriage to a man who was a poor provider, she had a better prospect in the wings, and her newborn was not large, lusty, and screaming. Explanations such as those proposed by McDowell or Schiefenhövel dictate that she would be likely to kill the child either at birth or through selective neglect. And indeed, after some time--from three days to a month--the child does die and Hermina is free to go on to a better life. However, Carter (1995) argues that rational models of neglect do an injustice to the messy, inconsistent and often inchoate way that women and families make decisions about children. Decisions evaluate desires as well as options and constraints. Thus Hermina's tale was less about decision-making and more about her old husband, her new husband, pressures placed on her through her male head of household and, perhaps most important, her response to values of womanly deportment as defined in traditional terms that emphasize subservience and docility.

The question of whether or not Hermina made a rational decision becomes a moot one focus shifts instead to the power of talk. Instead of seeking to understand Hermina's story through the term "infanticide," and then only in light of her maternal relationship to her newborn, it is more productive to look to the fact that Hermina told me a different story every time I talked to her. When I talked to others about Hermina, I also got a wealth of different interpretations. Everyone had opinions, but no one laid claim to the truth. This negotiated reality, I argue, occurs within the context of highly demarcated gender relations. Women's "veiled talk" (Strathern 1971) can be compared to men's as a "tactic" confronted by a "strategy" of power, to use de Certeau's terms (1986). As de Certeau describes it, strategies of the powerful involve an appropriation of space as a means to power. Within the claims to ownership of space come certain obligations -- a stiffness and a formality is required because in claiming space one becomes public. A tactician, however, has no power over spaces as does the strategist. Consequently, the tactics used by those who inhabit the spaces of the powerful are tricks, maneuvers, deceptions, and seizing opportunities; "art[s] of the weak" (de Certeau 1986:37). In the Baliem valley, women are the tacticians, men are the strategists. Women use tactics of silence and of trying to deflect blame for events such as infant mortality by gossiping about others, by trying to discredit those who talk about "bad mothers" by talking about them and discrediting their words as well. Hermina deflects blame well. She can argue without anyone being able to contradict her that her child had "no hope," because Otober did not engage in enough sexual relations with her, because he was already in trouble with his family, her family and their respective ancestors, and because of the weakness of his kin links with the living and his inability to help make her child grow through the contributions of others--sweet potatoes, netbags and little mouthfuls of pork fat.

If no one talks facts then the facts cannot be established, judgments cannot be handed down, and reputations cannot be ruined. As Gal (1991) convincingly argues, silence affords women the means to resist and to claim some measure of control in

relatively powerless situations. Silence keeps Hermina out of the kind of trouble Bety got into when her illegitimate baby died. Bety, who had already been the object of much gossip for abandoning her breastfeeding baby in the middle of the night, was charged in the official village courts with the indigenous offense of *neak hasik* (neglect to care for a person causing his/her death) when her five-month old baby died. In village records, Bety is recorded as saying that the *neak hasik* should be reversed because it was her husband's fault that the child died. He had been careless with his duties, had been a bad provider, had hit her and had made her drop the child. However, in the decision, Bety's family had to pay five pigs to her husband because it was claimed that she was careless with her five-month old infant--had dropped him, it was said--and caused his death. In a court system that favours men in divorce cases, that is run by men and where punishment is defined by men, it is not in any woman's interest to be found guilty of an act that betrays her husband's lineage.

Underlying the techniques of silence, deliberate and instrumental death of infants was discussed by only two women although alluded to by many. It is one of Dani women's most powerful secrets and perhaps the only one that can deeply challenge men's strategic power. Producing a live child aids men in their strategies; eliminating that child erases the chance for men to appropriate the status the child confers. The health and well-being of a child becomes a tool for negotiating relations. Such a strategic use has been noted for the Baruya, where Godelier (1986:43) has recorded the final phrase of a women's initiation poem as being "do not kill your child when you give birth to it. Men are more inclined to become attached to you when they have children." Women who want to resist men's attempts to impose absolute control over them may forget to cook food, may stay away for too long, neglect the pigs, refuse sex, engage in sorcery, and may "explicitly refus[e] to bear the child of an unbearable husband" (ibid: 150). Dani women have the same options and it has long been known that women have the option to kill a child:

It's very tricky to kill your child using just the placenta because the woman could also get sick and die (if animals and wood spirits get at the placenta both mother and baby can die). You have to figure out a way to kill the baby without harming the mother, and without seeing the baby's face. You sit on the baby. From olden times until now, a woman who doesn't want the baby will wait until the baby is almost out and then when his head is out, and the mother is already in the squatting position, just sit down. But this is tricky because you don't want to leave any marks.

If there are marks on the baby then the husband or relative might suspect something and the mother can be brought to trial and will have to pay a fine. But ideally you can say, 'the baby died in the stomach' and the husband should be filled with grief and pity and will answer 'that's OK, it doesn't matter.' But if the husband suspects then his family might insist on a trial. The fine is big, up to 15 pigs. If the baby has cuts and bruises or any kind of traces then people will say that the mother herself killed the baby.

A women may kill a child, but the point is that unless that conclusion is made up through gossip that turns into consensus, then the woman did not kill the child.

By not talking "facts," the community gets to make facts, ones that end up reflecting gendered power relations more than they do actual events. I heard so many different accounts of Bety's comings and goings that it soon occurred to me that she was a scapegoat, an Other who reflected the concerns of men who were opposed to the transitions taking place in the valley. Bety personified the worst case scenario for the pernicious effects of modernization on young women, and was used as an example (by both men and women of all ages) to encourage women to marry through traditional means, to retain expertise in the garden, and to be good wives and mothers. We do not know whether Bety's case was any different than Hermina's, in part because neither will talk about events, but mostly because it does not really matter. What matters is winning the war of words and Bety, already much maligned for her excessive running away, her seeming capricious refusal to settle down and grow a big garden, and perhaps also for her sexual charisma, was not able to marshal enough support to create a tale that would keep her off the judicial hook. Hermina, in contrast, more docile, listening to her male elders, and closer to the ideal female norms was able to guard her words and thus negotiated a different tale.

Polygyny and Ancestor Politics

In this second half of this chapter I turn to the case of two co-wives and to the domestic politics of polygynous families. The story of Deli and Juli draw out some of the ways that infants provide a rich resource for building meaning. I explore further how men and women respond differently to infant death, seeking to place blame in ways that reinforce acerbic gender relations. Explanations from Christian churches appear to have a role to play in local understanding but in the end formal religion has little real impact.

I begin the story of Juli and Deli by introducing their husband Ukumhearik. Ukumhearik lives on a fine spot of land just a few meters up the mountain slope that borders on the valley. From the doorstep of his "modern" house perched on a knoll on the hill, he can survey the road, his wives working the gardens nearby, and all the goings-on of a much-hated clan in the valley below. Ukumhearik is nominally a Baptist and he belittled Catholics for combining *adat* with Christianity. As a Baptist he claims to have renounced all *adat* rituals; if a child of his got sick he would "only pray" and would only kill a pig in celebration, not as part of a healing ritual. Ukumhearik lived by himself in his modern house which he keeps scrupulously clean and furnished with homemade chairs and benches, the walls decorated with photos of family, missionary newsletter photographs, and a large pin-up poster of the American actor Samantha Fox. In his presentation of self, Ukumhearik sells himself aggressively as a wealthy and influential leader.

Although he entertains guests in his modern home, Ukumhearik houses his six current wives in a large traditional compound about 50 yards behind his house. The compound kitchen holds a cookpit for each of his six wives, and he has built three women's huts down the opposing wall. My early fieldnotes reflect an uneasiness I felt

whenever I spent time in Ukumhearik's compound: "there is so much in this compound that is of interest, but the atmosphere is so tense and 'nasty' in an indefinable way; even the little piglet that lives in the cookhouse is evil and bites kids. I don't much enjoy my time there. A lot of secrets in the air." As interviews over the year unfolded, I deciphered many of the secrets, but the morose faces of most of Ukumhearik's wives has stayed with me and I have found it easy to believe that they are an unhappy bunch of co-wives. Life as a wife in a polygynous household is not always easy.

Deli is Ukumhearik's third present wife. She displays impressive fecundity for a Dani woman, and has had a total of five children, four of whom live. Deli attributes her reproductive success to a switch from ancestor worship to attentively following the Baptist church credo:

My oldest boy died when he was about 4 years old. He was fine, his body was strong but then he got sick with blood in his stool and I gave him some traditional medicine but he died right away. I told Ukumhearik that I wanted to become a Baptist after the boy died because I didn't want any more children to die, it made me *sakit hati* (heartsick) to lose my boy. Since I became a Baptist all my children have lived and I haven't needed any medicine for them.

Deli then pulled her baby girl, Meliana, out of her netbag and said to me: "look how plump she is. She looks this good because I have rejected *adat*." Indeed, Meliana was about 5 months old then, her arms and legs were rolling in baby fat, and when she woke up a minute later she looked at me bright-eyed and giggled. Although I had not been working in the village of Kuliama long at that point, I had already heard many claim rather than practice adherence to Christian beliefs, but Deli appeared to have rejected ancestor worship for good. Partly to see to what extent her adoption of "modern" ways shaped her baby's feeding patterns, and partly because I had some to spare, I gave Deli a tin of powdered baby porridge which she accepted with vocal delight and showed off to all of her co-wives with glee.

I ventured back into Ukumhearik's compound six weeks later to a much different situation. Little Meliana had been sick with diarrhea "a really long time" and had become

very skinny, Deli's eldest daughter said, rolling her eyes to highlight the point. At the same time that Meliana fell sick, another co-wife Juli (Ukumhearik's fourth wife) was also nursing a sick child. I interviewed the two women, though Deli dominated the conversation as she explained her frustrating situation:

When Meliana got sick she cried a lot, it was driving Ukumhearik crazy. He was so frustrated he took off for Wamena and stayed there for a whole week, he didn't give any money for the baby's medicine and we didn't ask him to pray for us. I took the baby to the *Puskesmas* (government health clinic) and I paid for myself, of course, Ukumhearik never gives us any money for medicine. If the baby has a really serious sickness then I can ask Ukumhearik to pray every day for her, but if it isn't serious then only I pray and I pay for her medicine. Besides he was in Wamena, so I had to look after the baby all by myself.

As Deli and her co-wife Juli see it, Ukumhearik is not an involved father, he is *kurang perhatian* (less than attentive) towards his wives and his children's well being. Deli stated strongly:

I bring her by myself to the clinic, if there is no money I stay at home, Ukumhearik never gives us any money, he only gave me money once. He's rich but he doesn't ever think about or look after his kids, clothes, *noken*, medicine we never have any, just women look after the kids. If a man is a good father he can't buy cigarettes all the time but Ukumhearik buys cigarettes for himself all the time, gives other people money for a taxi, gives them 5,000 or 10,000 rupiah (\$2.50 - \$5.00 US), whatever they need, randomly, but in this compound he doesn't give us any money, he just lets us be, that's all.

In contrast, says Juli, Ukumhearik stuck around when her son got very sick and offered to pray for her. "It is normal for a man to worry about his son," Juli said, "especially when the boy was so sick." Lina said she prayed for her boy four times a day, every day for two weeks, and then she took him to the *Puskesmas* where they gave him a tablet. Throughout the bouts of diarrhea of both Juli's son and Deli's daughter, the tin of porridge that I gave Deli remained untouched.⁵⁰

About three weeks after the second long interview Juli's son died. He was eight months old. Even though Ukumhearik and Juli prayed non-stop for their son's health, and

⁵⁰The tin of porridge was never used to feed infants. However, some months after I had given the porridge to Deli it disappeared from the compound.

Juli sought injections from the *Puskesmas* on four separate occasions during this second bout of illness, he grew thinner and thinner and stopped being able to eat or drink. The funeral was short and spartan, in keeping with revisionist Baptist rituals, and few came. Immediately afterwards Lina moved houses, not formally running away, but choosing to live outside of the compound. Some people, particularly her co-wife Deli, intimated that Juli was a "bad mother," that she had a *netaiigen weyak* (bad personality) and did not cry when the child was sick or even when he died: "she just acted happy, she didn't cry a wink." Juli just let the baby die, Deli said, and this was not surprising as another infant of Juli's had also died young, and she had run away then as well: "it was not surprising she couldn't keep this one alive," Deli said in a vicious attack on her co-wife, "she starved the baby to death, she didn't feed the baby or give him any milk and he would cry and cry all night. It's no surprise that he died."

In the eyes of many, the dead boy confirmed everyone's predictions that Ukumhearik was doomed to have his wives run away and his children die. The venom in Deli's assessment of her co-wife does not arise from co-wife hostility alone, but also reflects dominant assessments in the village about Ukumhearik, his past, and how he treats his wives in the present. Ukumhearik, it was said, could not escape the legacy of his *adat* transgressions. As he told me in an interview a couple of weeks later, while hanging clean clothes to dry on the fence by his house, the way he tried to save his children from dying and his wives from leaving was to give up Catholicism for the Baptist church over a decade ago:

I had twenty kids, I killed pigs, smeared blood on them when they were sick, and still some died. Now even though I am a Baptist they still die. Since becoming a Baptist I have had five kids and two of them have died. I tried the *adat* pig ritual even though the church forbids it and because of this two more kids have died.

Visibly scared at the repercussions of telling so many secrets in such a short time, he hunched closer to me and continued talking in a very low voice, "now I know I don't want to try this anymore, it's the church only for me from now on. *Adat* doesn't ensure the

welfare of the community, but the church does." Then Ukumhearik felt compelled to tell me some of his misdeeds, a fairly common act intended to placate the spirits, though I neither asked for nor wanted to hear his litany of transgressions. He said he had been kicked out of the Catholic church for killing five Hubi leaders, and that he had been put in jail by the Indonesian police in 1977 for harboring a clan member who had killed a military officer. As he confessed these events to me his voice got lower and lower, and he sunk lower and lower in his chair until he was bent over double, talking to the dust on the ground. Finally he shook his head and stopped. He was scared and wasn't going to tell me any more secrets. On his public responsibilities to his wives he was clear; be fair, pray when they ask, give money when you have a lot, but on the details of his transgressions and the impact of his past on the present well-being of his wives and children, he was highly agitated, as though the ancestors were still listening, and still in control, of Ukumhearik and all those who rely on him to ensure their well-being.

Ancestors and Power

Ancestors weigh heavily on the backs of all Dani. As one informant said, "one hundred percent of people in this valley still believe in ancestors, no matter what religion they say they belong to." As a factor shaping interpretations of infant growth and death, in the Baliem valley ancestors are without peer. Thus any analysis of local interpretations of death must include the ancestors as the apical fathers of social control. Ukumhearik still believes in their power, although he actively tried to get away by changing religions and healing practices. Ukumhearik has had a total of twelve wives but has lost six, two of whom died and the other four ran away. He may have lost another if Juli stays away. He has fathered a total of twenty-three children, nine of whom have died. Ukumhearik thus holds his own personal infant mortality rate of almost 40%. These numbers give him shame, and though they are a "secret" in that he does not talk about them for fear of other leaders knowing, everyone in the village is aware that Ukumhearik is still paying the

price for his actions of twenty years ago. They gossip about his disgruntled household, gossip that links dead babies in the present to ancestor revenge for the faraway past. Another leader, a nominal Catholic, also candidly explained the recent death of his toddler son as the price he continues to pay for transgressions--stealing a pig, having illicit relations--that he committed before marrying some fifteen years before.

Depending on the circumstances, everything that happens can be tied to ancestors. And everything about the ancestors can in almost every instance be tied to gender relations and relations of power. In this ancestor-as-etiology arena of post-hoc analysis, men often deflect blame onto the dead when they are presented with an infant death or the severe sickness of one of their offspring. Men thus avoid blame if the ancestor is seen to have acted in a pattern of ongoing malevolence. Ancestors also reduce individual blame by creating an etiology at one remove from the individual. This strategic delegation is available to men because they sustain and control relations with ancestors.

To provide an example of male logic about an infant's sickness and death, a married youth named Silas needed money and sold his *adat* pig at the Wamena market for \$350.00 US. With his profits he bought some smuggled whiskey and when he was dead drunk he fell into the firepit in the cookhouse and burned his arm so badly that it had to be amputated. His baby daughter, about ten months old at the time, fell sick just days after the amputation and nearly died. After she recovered she caught a bad case of scabies which she scratched and itched until her body was covered with sores, and which were still not healed six months later despite several trips to the *puskesmas* for treatment. Silas' arm refused to heal. According to Silas, the fall, the child's sickness and the scabies all point to ancestors. Silas had sold the *adat* pig and there are few crimes more likely to incite the wrath of ancestors.

In contrast, women have much less recourse to supernatural power and therefore claim to understand it less. While a few women have inherited healing or illness-inducing properties, access to ancestors and to witchcraft is strictly off limits for women. Women

therefore seek to lay blame on their husbands for the problems with their children. Women often rationalize their husbands' actions in a critical and pragmatic way. Women, powerless in terms of access to institutions that matter, can shape public opinion by the "transformation of problematic events into more ideal constructions" (Brison 1992; White & Watson-Gegeo 1990). In other words, women seek to remove personal responsibility for an infant's sickness or death by placing it squarely onto her husband's shoulders.

In the seven interviews I conducted with women who had had a baby infant die in the previous two years, in each case women offered an explanation that involved both her husband and the ancestors. Consider the following statement from a woman whose baby died the previous year:

If a child is born not healthy, this is because *adat* is wrong; if sick while little, it means that the father has done his *adat* wrong, it's not possible that it's the woman's fault, it's not possible, if the husband does *adat* wrong the wife can also get sick, the mother has done nothing wrong, all she knows about is how to take care of the baby, that's all she wants to do. If the father behaves himself, then the child cannot get sick.

In another interview, a woman named Robina admitted her husband's previous transgressions readily, but has come to accept them:

We have had three dead children now. We know now we will never get away from what he did. I don't want any more kids, they just die. I am too *sakit hati* (heartsick) to try again, I just have to give up on the idea.

A third woman named Tula, nursing a sick baby and visibly worried about his health, said,

When my first baby died my husband was away. When he found out he came back and he cried and cried. He was crazy for crying. Now we have two kids and I worry so much because he won't stop mixing *adat* with the church. He tries to do both and I want him to stop with the church because it's all the mixing that makes the babies die. But he won't stop.

Women and men openly express emotions associated with infant death. At funerals, a full expression of grief is considered appropriate, and a close relative,

particularly the mother, will mourn for several months.⁵¹ For example, Robina who is cited above chose to go on birth control because she couldn't stand any more sadness. She said her *etai-egen* was still *pedis* (spicy) with grief seven months after her young baby died. A minor adat leader, in despair over the loss of two children in a row, cut joints off two fingers on his left hand in an outlawed but still acceptable display of grief. Yet emotional expression plays only a small part in local understandings of infant death. Grieving does not affect analysis of events. On the contrary, excepting that apparent lack of grief gives enemies fuel for gossip, in the main emotions remain unproblematized, and grief is viewed as understandable under the circumstances. In a community in which explanations reside whenever possible within social frameworks, where "the measure of the worth of any knowledge is its social value" (Jackson 1996:36), we may take as axiomatic the tendency for men and women to seek to blame each other.

Household Relationships

Feminist theorists of family and kin argue that relations within a small group of people are shaped by power and inequality (Yanagisako 1979; Yanagisako and Collier 1987). Thus, households can be an arena wherein adults act out political relations through interpretations of infant physiology. Bledsoe (1993, 1995) has argued that understanding relations towards children must take into account the competitive nature of many households. She uses the example of polygynous households, where competition not cooperation is the norm, as a means to show that the household is not "an undifferentiated, sharing unit" (1995:133; Sen cited in Warren & Bourque 1991), but is a place where demands for equal treatment and concerns for hierarchy can drastically affect a child's well-being. It is something of a truism to assert that "fertility and

⁵¹Nominal and baptized Catholics conduct a full-scale funeral for infants (see Heider 1970, chapter 4 for a detailed description), although under the influence of the church, the quantity of gift-giving and expressions of grief have been somewhat reduced. Baptists, in contrast, adopt a minimal expression of public grief, no gift-giving, and a one day public ceremony (as opposed to the standard seven days among *adat* practitioners).

successful child raising are at the heart of adult power struggles " (Bledsoe 1995:132), but it summarizes the observations I made that Dani define their partners as fertile or not, their children as big or small, good or bad, his or hers, depending on the relationships they hold with each other and to the child. Among adult relations of power, those that occur within the household are particularly important.

In polygynous households worldwide, rancorous relations are common. Within a household, Bledsoe (1993) argues that fathers may show favorites among their wives because one is well-connected, is more attractive or has more children. This favoritism may spread down to the children as well. In addition, wives may favour their offspring from their current marriage over ones from a previous marriage. Having a child enables a woman to make demands of a father and to lever status in a way that a childless wife cannot always do. Bledsoe argues that polygynous families attribute meaning to reproduction and childrearing on the basis of processes of relations between husband and wife, and between husband and other wives, their families, their offspring and so forth until it becomes difficult to limit analysis solely to the household unit. Household-only analysis does not tell a full story, particularly in societies with high divorce rates, frequent remarriages and high levels of polygyny (Bledsoe 1995). Beyond the household, expectations of a married woman's kin, especially if they are influential in the community, may shift attention away from one child towards another. Through a study of the distribution of resources, argues Bledsoe, the tensions of the relations and their impact on children become obvious.

In polygynous households worldwide, women often endure extremes of jealousy over access to resources (Bledsoe 1993; Godelier 1986). In the Baliem valley, some stories of aggression between wives involve the baby as a means to exact revenge. A myth-like story, told me on three separate occasions by three separate women, describes how a jealous Dani co-wife tried to stage manage the death of her husband's latest progeny:

The first wife pretended to be friends with the second wife but in reality she was horribly jealous. The first wife offered to dispose of the placenta from the second wife's newborn in the river as tradition requires. Instead she buried it in the forest, where the animals attacked it, and the newborn baby got all covered with spots and died right away. The sad mother started to wonder why the baby got all covered in cuts and died and so she started to ask the older wife and she finally confessed. The birth mother's genitals that had been all infected as well got better right away and the woman who had done the evil deed died soon after.

The first wife acts because she is not a nice person, so the story goes. Yet this story reflects the real ambivalence of parenting within the confines of polygynous relationships. It is potentially in the interest of one wife to ruin the reputation of a co-wife, and what better way to do it than through the death of a child?

In contrast to Ukumhearik's situation, then, Catholic monogamous households in Kuliama should be free of competition over resources. While monogamy may reduce friction among adults in a compound, neither monogamy nor Catholicism distills the relationships parents have with ancestors. In a final example of the way long-standing beliefs penetrate households, dominate personal relations, and override competing belief systems, I turn to Kuliama's model monogamous Catholic household, Oskar Hubi and Pelesina Hilapok. This couple has four children, all born at least five years apart. Oskar Kossay is a clan leader, a paid employee at the government *desa* office, a church leader, owner of two "modern" houses in the center of Kuliama, and the household head of a compound by the river where he keeps his pigs. As they are both baptized they have taken a vow of monogamy. And yet, for all their Christian behaviour, Pelesina and Oskar know they are still paying the price for the way they got married twenty years ago, sneaking away instead of paying the brideprice up front during the marriage festival. Pelesina's father, who died soon after her marriage, told her he would never forgive her or Oskar for their transgression. They know that he still carries a grudge, for both of their male children show the force of his anger through their bodies. Proof of ancestral wrath is evident in the body of Cristianus, the eldest son, who was born without a left hand. Their

two daughters were born and grew without incident, but the youngest boy Timoteus, born in March 1995, has a head which looked normal at birth but has been growing crooked and at four months is noticeably slanted on one side. Twenty years later, laments Pelesina, her father still has not forgiven her.

As a significant mediator of modernizing influences, the church will no doubt shape structural and ideological patterns of childrearing in years to come. For now, the fact that ancestors predominate explanations strongly suggests that Dani build meanings about the health of their children through rather astute observations about mortality patterns. The Catholic church has been active in the valley for 40 years and if monogamous, baptized families always had healthy children, then I suggest that explanations would have expanded long ago to include the power of the church to keep children well. If the church were a proven means to save lives, religion would be invoked more to explain patterns. But mortality remains high throughout the valley, targets infants over adults, does so indiscriminately, and often violently through sudden infant death. Thus, while interviewed mothers make distinctions between the monogamous, Catholic, concerned father and the traditional, uncaring polygynist, in the presence of a dead child boundaries dissolve and preeminence is given to the explanatory models that can most clearly explain why that infant's body displayed the signs that it did--in a word, the logic of the ancestors.

If everyday well-being has little importance in the final, ideological, and negotiated constructions of what it was that "really happened" when a baby dies, that does not mean that this realm is of no importance. In highland societies, women have means for resisting ascriptions of blame about serious matters such as infant death through overt counter-ideological behaviour in less serious arenas: breaking taboos, refusing to perform garden work, or running away. Quality of mothering also allows tactics of opposition. If a woman doesn't get enough help or support, she might manipulate her behaviour in the home, create ambiguities intentionally as one of many

means to move forward into a better situation (Trawick 1990). But creating intentional ambiguities, such as leaving the child to cry sometimes or pretending not to care about it, or being lax in washing or changing the infant can lead to gossip about "bad mothering." In a world where gossip is rife and is the source for making up and sustaining truth statements about other people, such intentionality must be acted on very carefully. People are more inclined to believe stereotypical stories (Brison 1992). The line is fine between deliberate, selective neglect as a tactic to improve the quality of life (a woman leaves a child with someone in order to go to the market, stays a little longer than she should so as to enjoy a chat and a cigarette) and the judgment of "bad mothering." It resides in how others interpret her actions, in the shapes her silences take, and in the intense, prolonged gaze others focus on the health and growth of her child.

Conclusion

The negotiations to make political worlds fit with corporeal realities and vice versa can sometimes take a comical turn. One example is baby Adam, at eighteen months the plumpest, friendliest, and most healthy-looking baby I met in my travels in the Baliem valley. It was common knowledge that Adam's mother had become pregnant without being married, perhaps acting as a prostitute in Wamena, and had taken in inadequate amounts of semen that made for a sickly, skinny child who barely survived infancy. As this plump and friendly child climbed into my lap and gurgled happily, I found myself hard-pressed to understand how others could make a negative assessment through his physical health status. "But this child is so fat and friendly," I said to chatty Marta, who was going on about his poor health, to which Marta replied ominously, "Adam's mother doesn't have a husband, she has no garden, she can't feed her child well, she has no help from her mother and can't garden the plots she has. The child may look good now but he

won't live long." The combined assessments of social status, access to resources and ways of making the baby add up to a sickly child at risk of dying at any moment.

This manipulation of the corporeal to conform to social realities is a political act, one which serves to define status. Crandon-Malamud succinctly makes the point: "whatever really happened is secondary to people's perception of what happened. And people's perceptions are defined by their social, economic, and political positions and situations" (Crandon-Malamud 1991:180-181). Although the body of the baby reflects social worlds and the child's inherent sociality, the manipulation of perceptions grounded in hierarchies and status of that same social world pushes analysis firmly into the realm of local relations of power. The Dani astutely keep analysis at the level of local relations because there have been no indications that explanations should move outside of this realm. The subtle expressions of hierarchy within the community--Christian or not, chief's wife or not, first wife or not--as well as the not-so-subtle negotiations between men and women over status and place come together in meanings targeted and drawn from the infant. Above and beyond the highly social traits attributed to "fixed" characteristics of the infant (see chapter 4), the Dani can and do abstract the body from the uncertainties of infant bodily growth and from the perils of persons-in-the-making in order to make political statements about adult status and position.

In the next chapter, I extend the arena of the infant's political life by exploring the kinds of relations that surface during illness episodes where caregivers make a decision to use local clinic services. In particular I focus on records that show that boy infants receive different care than girl infants. As a complement to this chapter about infant death, data on sex ratios highlight the importance of infancy as a time period that both challenges and sustains received truths about the world.