7 Is it time to detach from attachment theory? Perspectives from the West African rain forest

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Introduction

In the West, strangers have had a problematic profile for some time. In an existential sense, as articulated in moving ways by Camus (1946), strangers challenge the notion of community that, as postmodern, largely urban dwellers, many of us crave – and for which we may nostalgically (though perhaps from a false sense of nostalgia) long.[1] In English, the term itself has decidedly sinister connotations. Strangers are dangerous. They represent a potential threat to our safety, and the safety, especially, of children – *our* children. Via the teachings of parents, teachers, and other authorities, North American and other Western(ized) adults in particular actively socialize children to feel fear at the sight, even the thought, of strangers.

For example, the federally funded initiative, D.A.R.E., which is now administered by local police departments around the USA, takes as its earliest goal the socialization of kindergartners into fearing strangers.[2] Through this program, police officers entering elementary schoolrooms instruct 5-year-old children to shun strangers who might abduct them for unspeakable purposes. "Don't talk to strangers," "Don't get into a

This chapter derives from long-term research I have conducted among the Beng people of Ivory Coast. Because of the continuing conflict in the nation, I have been unable to return to the Beng region since 1993; hence, this chapter depicts conditions before the nation's civil war. The Beng people found themselves on the military front line, and their villages were invaded by both sides of the conflict; the effect on the sorts of community-wide child-rearing practices I report on in this chapter are unknown. Until recently, life in the villages was dramatically disrupted and is only now beginning to return to pre-civil war conditions; for a brief update, see Gottlieb and Graham (2012, epilogue).

[1] On the undeserved nostalgia for an imagined utopic "community" of an earlier America, see, for example, Coontz (1992), May (1988).

[2] The acronym stands for Drug Abuse Resistance Education. According to its website, the program, which was begun in 1983 in Los Angeles, is now active in 75% of schools in the USA. It has also spread well beyond the USA, being present in over forty-four countries internationally (www.dare-america.com).

car with a stranger," "Don't take candy from a stranger" – these lessons become mantras that we hope our young children will memorize and internalize for their own protection. Significantly, D.A.R.E. itself is conceived of first and foremost as an anti-drug-use campaign. Thus, as taught in the program (in quite explicit ways for older students), the category of "stranger" is linked with illegal drug use and drug trafficking, which themselves constitute an undisputed site of evil in the contemporary public imagination. Through initiatives such as D.A.R.E in the USA and other postindustrialized and urbanized societies – coupled with the daily, more informal teachings of parents and other adults – "strangers" have come to represent the epitome of the demonized Other.

Mary Douglas has written convincingly of the broader meanings that danger and risk convey to members of a given society (1966, 1970, 1992; Douglas and Wildavsky, 1982). How a society conceives of dangers – as localized internally or externally, for example, or as sited in tangible or invisible loci – says much about how it imagines the notion of community and relations among neighbors. Accordingly, this constellation of ideas may connect with social networks and the idea of social ties in subtle yet significant ways. Thus, I believe it is not coincidental that the generalized fear of the stranger-as-dangerous-other occurs in contemporary societies in which the bonds of family are themselves often strikingly attenuated. Although some endeavor to maintain active extended family ties, this effort becomes harder and harder to achieve as work demands (and ambitions) separate families across the country, even across the globe, at the same time that a variety of effective birth-control techniques produce ever smaller families.

In post-industrialized societies such as the USA, child development researchers have noted that infants and young children tend to establish a relatively low number of intense relationships, or "attachments" – generally to those in their nuclear family, and especially to their mother. Although the first generation of researchers took this striking pattern as a biologically based model that must be universal (e.g., Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980), a more recent generation of researchers sensitive to cross-cultural differences in infant behavior have noticed that the pattern may be a peculiarly Western one resulting from a particular configuration of social, historical and political structures not replicated elsewhere.[3] In this chapter, I aim to contribute to this stimulating and growing literature.

[3] For some recent examples, see Neckoway, Brownlee, and Castellan (2007); Rothbaum, Weisz, Pott *et al.* (2000); Wulff (2006). For an excellent summary of earlier research on attachment theory, see Harwood, Miller, and Irizarry (1995); for an appreciative biography of its creator, see Holmes (1993).

I do so from an anthropological rather than psychological perspective; hence, my approach is somewhat lateral rather than head-on.

I begin by posing the question: Do all societies socialize their youngest members to fear strangers with the goal of defining the very category of "stranger" as socially/symbolically/legally threatening? I explore this question in the context of infant-care practices among the Beng people of Ivory Coast. I then expand this question to look at a set of infant-care practices that, I suggest, promote a large number of "attachments" to a wide variety of people, including relatives as well as unrelated neighbors. I conclude by suggesting some tentative factors that may go some way towards explaining the Beng pattern, which is so distinct from the dominant contemporary Western one.

Strangers in a Beng land[4]

Along the northern edge of the rain forest of Ivory Coast, the Beng term that most easily approximates "stranger" – *tiniŋ* – occupies a strikingly different semantic field from that which it occupies in most urban Western societies. By Beng definition, a *tiniŋ* is neither (intrinsically) morally good nor bad, neither threatening nor protecting. However, far more often than not, *tiniŋ* are seen in a positive light. For most *tiniŋ* who enter a Beng village, "visitor" or "guest" would be a better translation than "stranger." Yet, in some contexts, the English "stranger," with its typically negative connotations, does fit well. In the Beng world, some *tiniŋ* do in the end turn out to be unwelcome, occasionally even threatening. Such is the case of the guest who overstays her welcome, or turns out to be a witch, or humiliates his host with his superior powers of magic, all of which I have seen occur from time to time in Beng villages. But on initial encounters, the benefit of the doubt regarding the character of the *tiniŋ* is routinely given by Beng people. To make an analogy with the US legal system, "strangers" are generally assumed to be innocent until proven guilty.

A *tiniŋ* is immediately *incorporated* into the local social universe as soon as one encounters such a person. In fact, even before entering a new village, a *tiniŋ* usually makes an effort to contact someone who lives in that village so as to forge a social link ahead of time. That new host/ess would then welcome the stranger into the village and introduce him or her to others in the village as *n tiniŋ*, or "my stranger" – or, perhaps we should say, "my guest," because in most social situations in Beng villages, such "strangers" fade into "guests" quite rapidly. This is in effect the

[4] For a somewhat general ethnography of Beng society, see Gottlieb (1996). For narratives of fieldwork among the Beng, see Gottlieb and Graham (1994, 2012).

sociological lesson implied by the fact that in the Beng language, only a single word covers both concepts – which are clearly distinguished in Indo-European languages. Indeed, signaling the "ambidextrous" nature of the Beng term *tiniŋ*, those Beng who speak French use the term *étranger(ère)* to translate *tiniŋ* when one might expect the more friendly term *invité(e)* (guest) to be used instead.[5]

That *tiniŋ* often occupy a valued social space in Beng thought is revealed in architectural practice. While building a new house, the homeowner often incorporates one log of a particular tree somewhere in the construction. In Beng, the name of this tree is *gaŋwróŋ*, but it is also referred to as the *tiniŋ yrí*, or "stranger/visitor/guest/tree," because it is said to house benevolent spirits (*bɔŋzɔ*) (see key to phonetic symbols at the end of the chapter) inside it that will attract many strangers/guests to the house. Accordingly, in seeking forest trees to chop down as firewood, women are warned never to cut down *gaŋwróŋ* trees; otherwise, their house will never attract *tiniŋ*.

In short, Beng notions of sociality create a very different set of contours around the notion of "the stranger" than does the dominant contemporary Western understanding of the term. It is not that there is no category whatsoever for "the stranger" (in its negative sense) in Beng-land. Rather, once a person has been placed in the "stranger" category, unspoken rules of politeness demand the abolition of the *potential* threat embodied by the "stranger" rubric as quickly as possible in most ordinary social situations. In other words, a "stranger" is typically transformed into something else almost as soon as his or her "stranger" status has been announced. Through the act of being introduced and greeted, a newcomer – who may indeed at first be a "stranger" in the Western sense – enters into the *moral community* of those whom she or he has just greeted; having already greeted people who are part of their geographical proximity, that geographic space has become in effect a social space, with the possibility of further social interaction now publicly imagined (see Riesman, 1977).

[5] In French, the semantic scope of *étranger(ère)* is similar to that of the English "stranger," while *invité(e)* (derived from Latin, *invitare*) corresponds to the English "guest" (derived from German, *Gast*). According to *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (1993, vol. I, p. 1158), the English term "guest" also denoted what we now term "stranger" for a period, from the mid twelfth through the late sixteenth centuries, but the entry notes that this meaning is now obsolete. It is tempting to speculate that the relatively brief period during which the English term "guest" also meant "stranger" is precisely the late medieval/early modern period leading to the rise of European urbanism – when, increasingly, guests might well have been strangers, and the entire enterprise of urbanization was potentially seen as psychologically threatening. However, I leave it to linguists and historians to pursue this line of inquiry. In any case, my point refers precisely to the modern period, following the late sixteenth century, when the two meanings of the English words "guest" and "stranger" have been, and continue to be, quite disjunct in daily parlance.

And, of course, a member of a moral community is the antithesis of a "stranger." In this way, the potential danger that "strangers" may in theory represent is almost instantly neutralized in Beng villages, and people are not continually made anxious by the fear of "strangers" precisely because in most situations, strangers do not remain "strangers" – in the dominant, contemporary Western understanding of the term – for more than a few moments at most.[6]

How are Beng babies taught a worldview in which "strangers" do not remain "strange" for very long? There are many infant-care practices to which I can point that begin to teach even the very youngest babies to treat strangers as welcome. Let us begin at the beginning: the very first moments of life in "this world," when – according to the Beng model of reincarnation – the Beng infant has begun the first stages of leaving the previous life of *wrugbe* behind and has started to enter, however tentatively, this life (Gottlieb, 1998, 2000).

The first vision the newborn sees is the presence of several people, typically all women, in the birthing room.[7] Aside from the mother, the (healthy, alert) baby usually sees/hears a grandmother, often an aunt, and perhaps one or two other female kin.[8] Of course, at this early stage, the infant knows nothing about kinship and is unable to distinguish between kin and nonkin. But very soon the baby will learn that the faces and voices of those first strangers in the birthing room show up regularly and begin to seem familiar.

At the same time, the newborn's social circle widens dramatically almost immediately following the birth. As soon as an infant emerges from the mother's womb, assuming the baby appears healthy, while one of the older women present washes the newborn, someone else from the mother's family walks around the village as a messenger, announcing

[6] There is anecdotal and some brief published evidence among scholars that the pattern I have described may be common in other villages throughout West Africa, and even farther afield on the continent (e.g., Wall, 2009); comparative research on this issue across the continent at large is sorely needed.

[7] In the case of a very difficult childbirth in the village, a male healer may be called in to administer herbal remedies, and a male ritual specialist (commonly referred to as a "Master of the Earth" across much of West Africa) may enter to offer prayers and sacrifices.

[8] Naturally, infants vary in their level of alertness during their first few hours, even days postpartum. However, Western researchers have documented that the sort of "floppy" (and nonalert) babies one sees increasingly in hospital newborn wards are frequently explained by the high level of drugs nowadays routinely administered to laboring women (even more in the case of cesarean-section deliveries, which require anesthesia). In rural villages such as those I am describing, such drugs are unavailable. As a result, Beng newborns on the whole are probably more alert than are most newborns born in hospitals. My own more informal observations in both contexts would support this comparison.

the baby's arrival to members of every village household (Gottlieb, 1995). On hearing the news, people flock to the courtyard to welcome the fresh arrival to the village, and to this life. Within about an hour, a long line forms outside the door of the birthing room. One by one, men and women approach the doorway and address the new mother with a formulaic exchange:

V(ISITOR): *Na ka kwau* [Mother, good afternoon].
M(OTHER): *Aúúúŋ, mú wiyau* [Good afternoon].
V: *Aúŋ* [Mm-hmm]. *Ka n gba pɔ* [What have you given me]?
M: *Leŋè* [or] *gɔŋè* [A girl (or) A boy].
V: *Ka nuwaliaà* [Thank you].
(The visitor may then toss small change to the mother.)
M: *Aúŋ* [Mm-hmm].

This exchange is repeated over and over as a representative of every household comes to congratulate the new mother.

During this stream of visitors, the mother lies on mats on the floor with her baby, both keeping warm next to a fire. She is, of course, exhausted, so one of the older attendants, typically her own mother, takes over care of the newborn. This person's primary responsibility is to make sure that the baby stays awake to see the stream of visitors and realize how welcome she or he is to this new life. Depending on the size of the village, the line of guests may take a half-hour or even an hour to complete the greeting series. So within the initial two hours or so of life outside the womb, the newborn is taught his or her first lesson: to be human is to engage in sociable fashion with a large number of new people – and these new people, who at first appear to be strangers, are in fact friendly and indeed welcoming; many, though not all, will turn out to be kin.

This lesson continues well past the ritual welcoming line. Over the next few weeks, the new baby will receive dozens, perhaps hundreds more visits. Some will be from the same people who appeared in that initial welcoming line, some will be from other residents in the village, or from other villages altogether. These visitors will typically enter the room in which the mother and newborn are lying, and will spend some time visiting – anywhere from a few minutes to an hour or two. As hostess, the primary duty of the new mother is to allow each visitor to connect actively with the newborn. A sleeping baby is invariably awakened, and the mother or an attending kinswoman (usually her own mother) addresses the baby directly to introduce him or her to the *tiniŋ*.[9] Indeed, the newborn is

[9] The practice of waking a sleeping baby to introduce to visitors has been documented elsewhere in Africa (e.g., Johnson, 2000, on the Fulani) and may indeed be fairly common on the continent.

given early lessons in greeting, which will become so important later in life (Gottlieb and Graham, 1994), when the mother or another woman "speaks for" the baby in encounters with the guest. For example, a visitor may ask the baby her name, and one of the adult women in the room will hold up the newborn and, much as a ventriloquist might speak through a puppet, will answer in the first person as if she were the infant, "My name is so-and-so." This practice is so deeply entrenched that adults may apologize if they fail to engage in it. In one case I observed, a woman who was taking care of a baby failed to respond immediately for the infant when a visitor greeted him; when she did respond after a delay, she did so apologetically, making clear that she had shirked her responsibility of "speaking for" the baby. Through this practice, an infant is in effect taught the value of engaging in social encounters from the first days after birth.

A new child is introduced to visitors not only visually and verbally but also somatically: normally, the infant is handed to the visitor. A visitor may decline the chance to hold the baby, but it is imperative to make the offer. A mother who makes no attempt to awaken her sleeping newborn and hand him or her to a visitor is considered selfish: unwilling to allow her new child to be claimed as owned by the village as a collectivity.

Indeed, Beng villagers extend this principle in a dramatic way. They maintain that, in theory, any young child is eligible to be adopted by anyone else in the village. In practice, this option is typically exercised by close female relatives, especially sisters, or women who call themselves "sisters" (they might be first- or second-degree matrilateral parallel cousins, or even more distantly related clanmates). Nevertheless, the option of adopting any fellow villager's baby exists at the level of local thought, emphasizing the extent to which the bonds of community define any guests and visitors to the household as friendly to the utmost degree.

The somatic lessons of sociality also extend from holding the baby to breast-feeding. During the first few days after birth, it is likely that colostrum has not yet been replaced by milk in the new mother's breasts. Like many women in other parts of the world, Beng women do not consider colostrum substance nourishing.[10] During this period, some Beng mothers give their babies only water to drink; others may look to find another nursing mother who will breast-feed their new child until their own breast milk comes in. The wet nurse may well be the new

[10] For some discussions of this issue among several world groups, see Hastrup (1992), Stuart-Macadam (1995, p. 85). Scientific research increasingly points to the nutritional value of colostrum; for overviews, see Uruakpa, Ismond, and Akobundu (2002) and Xu (1996).

mother's own mother, if she herself has a nursing baby at home. If her own mother is unable to serve as a wet nurse, a new mother may find another nursing mother – probably but not always a close relative – to breast-feed her newborn during the first day or two after birth.

Once her milk comes in, a mother will breast-feed her newborn very frequently around the clock (Gottlieb, 2004, ch. 8). Of course, this can well leave a new mother exhausted. In this case, other nursing mothers who live nearby, or who are visiting, may feel sympathy for her. If the newborn cries and the mother is sleeping or worn out, another nursing mother who happens to be in the bedroom may casually pick up the newborn to nurse. Let us observe this scene:

> Afwe is a first-time mother of a 2-day-old. Her tiny daughter has been sleeping, nursing, and fussing, generally in 5-minute intervals, for the past hour-and-a-half. At the moment, the baby's paternal grandmother is holding her asleep in her arms. A woman comes into the room and, after greeting and congratulating Afwe, takes the baby out of the grandmother's arms and looks at her. Satisfied at what she has seen, she hands the infant back to her grandmother.
>
> But the baby is unhappy at having been awakened and soon starts to cry hard. Her grandmother speaks softly to her, asking, "*ɟe'á diŋ – e loà*?" – "Sorry – what's the matter?" The newborn has no reply beyond further crying, and the grandmother offers her a breast. As a nursing mother of a toddler herself, this young grandmother also has milk in her breasts, and the little one nurses happily for 5 minutes before settling back into a comfortable sleep in her grandmother's arms.

Later, when the baby is a little older and the mother has gone back to work, wet nursing may also be a temporary measure to which others resort when they are caring for the baby whose mother is not around. In this case, the momentary wet nurse may be any other nursing mother who may or may not be related to the baby's own mother.[11]

A variation on this theme might be called "dry nursing."[12] Suppose a mother drops off her baby with a friend, neighbor, or relative and goes off

[11] Given women's fertility cycles, this is likely to happen with the first grown daughter or two. The vagaries of demography, of course, increase or decrease the likelihood of a given grandmother being a nursing mother at the same time that her own daughter is also a nursing mother. For example, if a woman has her first child at the age of 18, and that child is a girl, and that daughter likewise bears her first child at the age of 18, there may be another 5–10 years during which mother and daughter are both bearing – and breast-feeding – children at the same time. However, if a woman bears her first child when she is in her twenties and her first or second child is male, this overlap in fertility with a future daughter is less likely to occur.

[12] My use of the term "dry-nursing" differs from conventional usage, which generally refers to the practice of raising an infant on solid foods rather than on any form of milk (whether human or animal) (e.g., Fildes, 1995; Stuart-Macadam, 1995). I find the latter

for some time (perhaps to fetch water or chop wood). In a little while, the baby cries. Perhaps he is hungry, perhaps he misses his mother, perhaps he misses the previous life in *wrugbe* he left behind – no one really knows. The babysitter offers him some water, but he refuses it, or it fails to satisfy him. As long as there's an adult woman around, anyone can offer to "breast-feed" the infant – whether or not there is breast milk available. In effect, such a woman serves as a human pacifier. Consider this scene:

2:30 pm – Tahan decides to fetch water from the pump. On the way back, she will be carrying water on her head, and it would be hard to carry her 6-month-old son Sassandra without spilling the water, plus the two loads together would be quite heavy. She decides to leave Sassandra with her mother, Amenan – a middle-aged woman who had her last child 8 years ago.

As soon as Tahan leaves the compound, Amenan pretends to breast-feed Sassandra. He is happy but not ravenous. Thinking Sassandra is in a mood to play, Amenan asks him, "*ŋo mí sí pɔ*?" – "What's your name?" He does not seem terribly stimulated by the question, and Amenan thinks he might be tired. He has only slept for a few minutes so far today and should be ready for a nap. Amenan says gently to her grandson, "*yile mi delo, nyo mi nyɛ bedà*" – "You're sleepy – nurse, and then go to sleep."

3:05 pm – Sassandra sucks on his grandmother's empty breast until he "nurses" himself to sleep.

3:25 pm – Sassandra awakes, and Amenan sits him up in her lap. She calls over to her 10-year-old daughter, Ajua, to come squeeze her nipple, maybe some milk will come out. Ajua giggles with excitement at the idea of this game. She comes over and playfully tells her nephew to bite his grandmother's nipple. Smiling, Amenan cautions Sassandra not to bite her, but Ajua stuffs her mother's nipple into the baby's mouth, encouraging him to bite it. Afraid he may oblige, Amenan removes her breast and instructs her daughter to carry Sassandra off to his mother at the pump so that he can breast-feed for real.

But Ajua has caught sight of a picture-book I have lying around. She spots a photo of a baby bottle and shows it to Sassandra, telling him, "*a mí!*" – "Drink it!" I find this very funny, but Sassandra does not laugh – never having seen an actual baby bottle, nor having a distinct sense of the difference between two- and three-dimensional objects (DeLoache, Pierroutsakos, Uttal *et al.*, 1998), he clearly does not understand the joke. Besides, he is still sleepy – he is managing to keep himself wake, but not to be very lively.

4:25 pm – Sassandra falls asleep in his grandmother's arms. After a few false starts, he nods off again, and when another young aunt transfers him to a mat on the ground, he manages to sleep for some time.

meaning misleading, however, and prefer the meaning I have indicated in the text as more intuitively flowing from the term.

In this scene, a grandmother's breasts have been used both as a serious pacifier, and as a playful joke. Sassandra is a baby who does not nod off easily, and his grandmother has judged that the only way he will nap – which, she thinks, he needs to do – is via breast-feeding. Since his mother is not around, her own breast should do. Still, Amenan realizes the silliness of the gesture, and she is not offended when her own daughter turns the charade into a joke.

In a communal babysitting setting, even a child may urge a nonnursing woman to pretend-breast-feed an unhappy young charge. Consider the following scene, once again involving my friend Amenan and two more of her daughters:

> One afternoon a neighbor drops off her baby Eric for the compound at large to take care of, and the baby gets passed around from person to person. My husband plays for a few minutes with Eric under the coffee trees, and then Amenan's 8-year-old daughter Lucy carries Eric over to her older sister, 13-year-old Esi, who is sitting under the compound's granary. Five minutes later, Eric starts to fuss a bit. Esi brings Eric to her own mother. Having had her last child, Lucy, 8 years ago, Amenan is not a breast-feeding mother and in no position to nurse Eric. But bossy, teenage Esi firmly instructs her mother, "*kà gba nyó*!" – "Give him your breast!" Amenan obliges. Sucking the empty breast, Eric is happy.

These examples all speak to a rather casual attitude towards both wet- and dry-nursing. This casualness is, I suggested, reflected in linguistic usage. It is significant that there is no word in Beng for "wet-nursing," nor for the variation I have termed "dry-nursing." Both are simply called by the same word for breast-feeding: *nyo miale* (literally, "to drink the breast"). I suggest that this linguistic inattention signals a broader-based inattention. The difference between the breast-feeding biological mother and another woman – whether or not she herself is currently a breast-feeding mother – who might offer a breast to a hungry baby is simply not valorized.

In effect, I suggest that Beng breast-feeding practices produce a particular lactational signature. In the Beng case, this signature is a markedly social one. That is, while there is no doubt that most Beng newborns, like nursing newborns elsewhere, have an especially close relationship with their nursing mothers, the intensity of that relationship – its monogamous nature, as it were – may be significantly mitigated, in part due to the common practice of spontaneous wet- (or dry-)nursing. In the experiences of many Beng babies, any woman's breast – even one that has no milk in it – is potentially a site for pleasurable sucking (if not nourishment). This must lead a baby to create the image of a relatively large pool of people to satisfy two of life's earliest and strongest

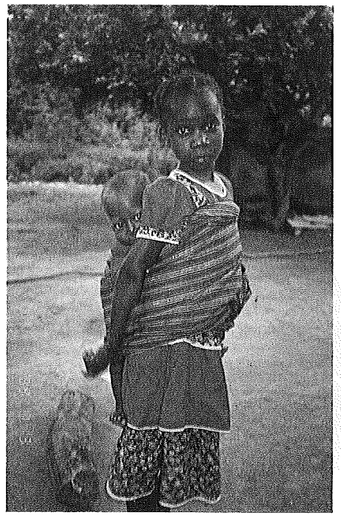

Figure 7.1 Often the baby is attached to someone else who is designated as a babysitter (*ley kuli*) (© and photographer Alma Gottlieb).

desires – the desire to satisfy hunger (by ingesting breast milk) and to relieve stress (by sucking). Perhaps (at least, to the Western mind) ironically, for a Beng baby, learning the value of sociability often begins at the breast.

Somewhere between 2 and 4 months of age, a new baby starts to range out from the household somewhat regularly. It is then that the mother (assuming she has recovered normally from the delivery) starts returning to work in the fields. At first the new mother may go to work just for an hour or two, and maybe just one or two days a week. But by 3–4 months postpartum at the latest, she will be back at her agricultural work full-time. And what of the baby? The little one spends much of the day in a vertical position on someone's back, often napping. Sometimes this back belongs to the baby's mother, but often the baby is attached to someone else who is designated as a babysitter (*ley kuli*) (Figure 7.1).

Revealingly, the title of such a person translates literally as "baby catcher" or "baby holder," indicating the close physical contact required of the baby's substitute caregiver.

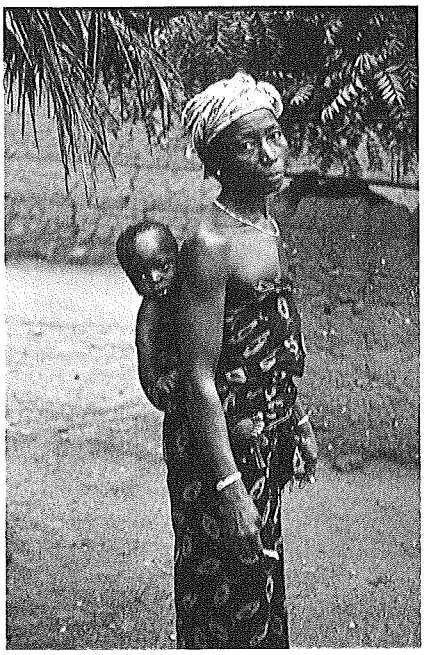

Figure 7.2 A lucky new mother commandeers the babysitting services of a relative (© and photographer Alma Gottlieb).

Doing very demanding physical labor with a baby attached to her back is not considered optimal for a new mother's own health; the Beng acknowledge that it can also seriously reduce her work productivity. For these reasons, the mother often tries to find a regular *lɛŋ kuli* for her infant. A lucky new mother will be able to commandeer the babysitting services of a relative (who is usually but not always female) such as another daughter, a younger sister, a niece, or a young cousin who does not yet have children, or perhaps her own mother or an older sister or older cousin whose children are all grown (Figure 7.2).

Such babysitters may be quite young by Western standards. It is common to see girls as young as 7 or 8 years old carrying around a baby on their back (Figure 7.3).[13]

If there is no such relative available, the new mother may search the village for an unrelated young girl who is willing to provide these services on a fairly regular basis. In all such situations, the baby may become

[13] See Weisner and Gallimore (1977) for a more general discussion of this pattern in non-Western settings.

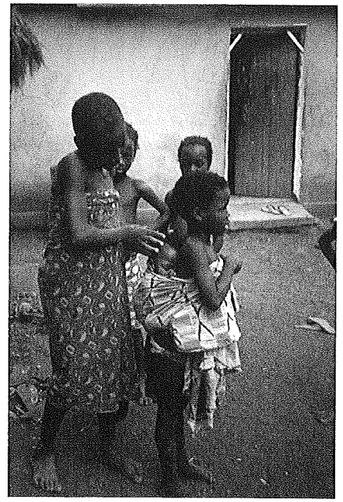

Figure 7.3 It is common to see girls as young as 7 or 8 years carrying a baby on their back (© and photographer Alma Gottlieb).

quite attached to the young caregiver; in later years, the grown child may point to the now grown woman and indicate with warmth, "She was my *ley kuli*." Nevertheless, not all babysitters can be full-time babysitters; especially if they are teenagers or older, they have lives too, perhaps their own fields to farm, their own children to raise. Therefore, many Beng mothers of infants try to have a network of potential *ley kuli* who can care for their infants while they do their farm and other work.

In order to attract a wide pool of potential babysitters, mothers typically spend an hour or more every morning grooming their babies (male and female) to make them look beautiful (Figure 7.4).

The aim is to make the baby as physically attractive as possible, so as to seduce potential babysitters into offering their caregiving services to the adorable baby. A mother's long, daily routine of beautifying her baby begins with an enema, includes a bath of both skin and jewelry, and ends with the application of makeup, jewelry, and often powder or oil on the very elaborately adorned infant (Figure 7.5) (Gottlieb, 2004, ch. 5).

An especially radiant child may indeed attract a large cohort of potential babysitters.

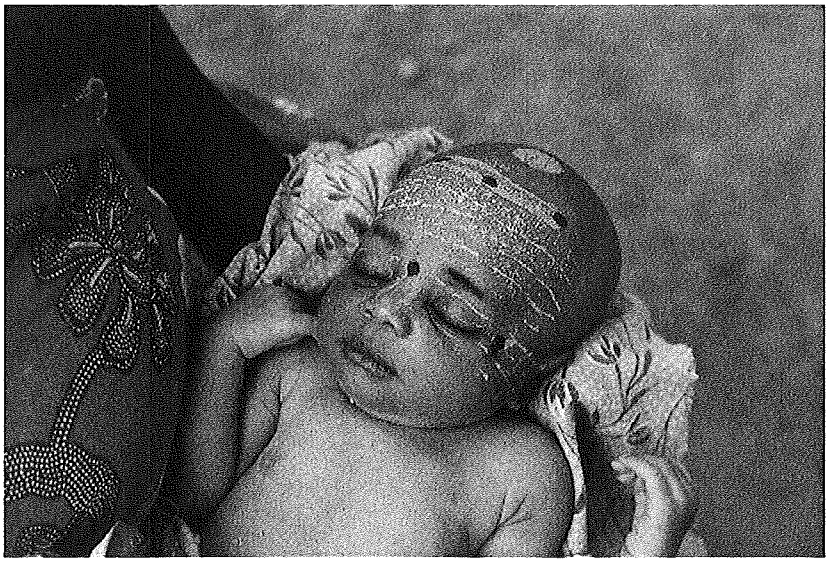

Figure 7.4 To attract a wide pool of potential babysitters, mothers typically spend an hour or more every morning grooming their babies (© and photographer Alma Gottlieb).

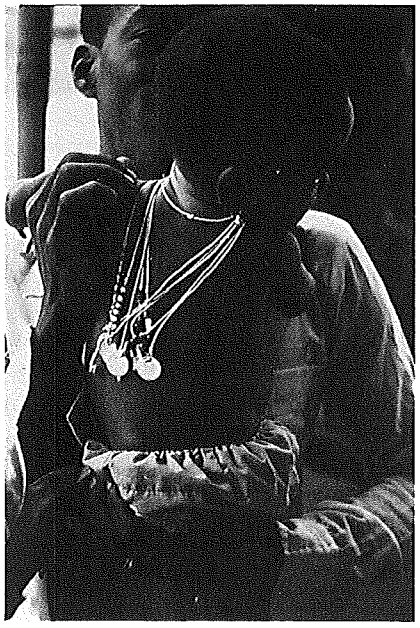

Figure 7.5 A mother's long, daily routine of beautifying her baby begins with an enema, includes a bath of both skin and jewelry, and ends with the application of makeup, jewelry, and often powder or oil on the very elaborately adorned infant (© and photographer Alma Gottlieb).

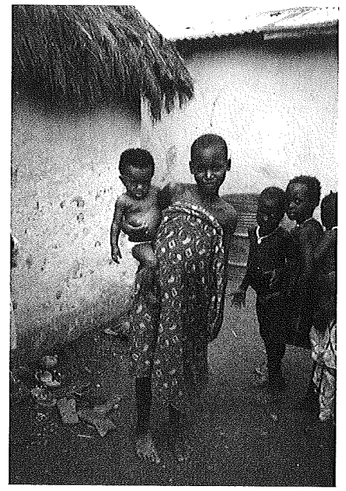

Figure 7.6 Most Beng babies are passed quite often from one back to another on any given day (© and photographer Alma Gottlieb).

In any case, most babies do not spend all of their days attached to the back of a single person – whether their mother or a single babysitter; rather, they tend to be passed quite often from one back to another on any given day (Figure 7.6).

Of course, the younger the child caregiver, the more likely that the baby will not last long on her babysitter's aching back. But older babysitters also have their own reasons to put down their charge after some time – their own lives that demand other kinds of engagements. And the babies may themselves fuss, in ways that are interpreted as a request for a change of carrier. In short, the life of an infant is a sociable one – the young child has abundant social contacts. Frequently, a baby will not spend more than an hour or two with a given person, and a mother may not even know where her baby is at any given time. In such a setting, babies learn to value sociability.[14]

And what about stranger anxiety? Is there a place at all for the concept in Beng understandings of infant development? In fact, the Beng have a

[14] Additional factors relating to spiritual considerations account for some of these practices; I explore these elsewhere (Gottlieb, 1998, 2004).

term that might be translated with some accuracy as "stranger anxiety." In referring to some babies, mothers use the term "*gbanɛ*," which literally means to be clingy and normally refers to the baby's relation to the mother. For example, in explaining to me that none of her children were like this, one mother said proudly, "*ŋo ta sɔŋ klɛ – ŋà gbànɛ*" ("They go with [other] people – they don't cling [to me]"). Clingy Beng infants are very clearly (positively) "attached" to their mothers in the sense meant by child-development researchers. Like many of their Western counterparts, they are happiest when in the company of their mothers and appear noticeably anxious or fearful when confronted with a "stranger." And, like their Western counterparts, they tend to exhibit this quality towards the end of their first year.

One such child often cried in my own presence, for instance. While I did not administer the "strange situation" test in the field to assess the level and nature of his attachment to his mother, as strictly outlined by experimental psychologists, I am certain that if I had, children classified by the Beng as *gbanɛ* would have passed the test with flying colors, crying appropriately when their mothers left the room or courtyard and abandoned them to a stranger. At a *de facto* level, this is indeed what happened when one mother tried to pass such a baby to me to hold, even in her presence – unlike what happened with most other Beng babies of all ages, who usually allowed me to hold them with no qualms, even if the mother left the babies' view (Figure 7.7).

But what is significant in its implications for the attachment literature is that Beng children who are classified as *gbanɛ* are considered by the Beng to be difficult children ("*ŋo sie grégré*" – "Their character is difficult"). Indeed, they are frequently criticized and derided. Their mothers consider themselves unfortunate to have to deal with such clinginess. How will they get their work done?

They will have to keep the baby with them at all times, and for a full-time farmer this is quite physically demanding (Figure 7.8). A Beng baby who exhibits the sort of "stranger anxiety" that was considered healthy by the first generation of attachment theorists is a failure by Beng standards. At best, such a baby is a major nuisance to her mother. In the worst-case scenario, if she hinders her mother's work efforts significantly, the infant may even threaten the food supply of her household, thereby compromising the health of her siblings and others in the compound.[15]

[15] For a penetrating discussion of the fully interdependent relations among mothers, infants, and others in the family from the standpoint of the household food supply, see Popkin, Lasky, Spicer *et al.* (1986).

Figure 7.7 Most Beng babies of all ages allowed me to hold them with no qualms, even if the mother left the baby's view. (© Alma Gottlieb, photographer Philip Graham).

Given all I have said so far, what are the circumstances that might produce a "clingy baby" who "does not go to [other] people," including strangers? I was unable to conduct a study of a large number of such babies in Beng-land for one simple reason: there were not many of them at all. Indeed, I identified only one such infant in a very large village (pop. *c.* 1,500). At the time I came to know him, this baby – we will call him Kwame – was 9 months old. In Euro-American babies, this is a classic age for the onset of stranger anxiety, and in the case of Kwame, it had indeed set in with vengeance. Every time he saw me, Kwame crawled anxiously to his mother and stayed firmly in her lap or otherwise clung to her long skirt (*pagne*). Once, I left for a few minutes and returned to the courtyard to see Kwame exhibiting with a rare curiosity in playing with an exotic object – the external microphone of my tape recorder, which I had left on the ground. I decided to seize the opportunity and use the object to see how anxious my presence made him: I moved the microphone on the ground just out of his reach, nearer to me. Now that

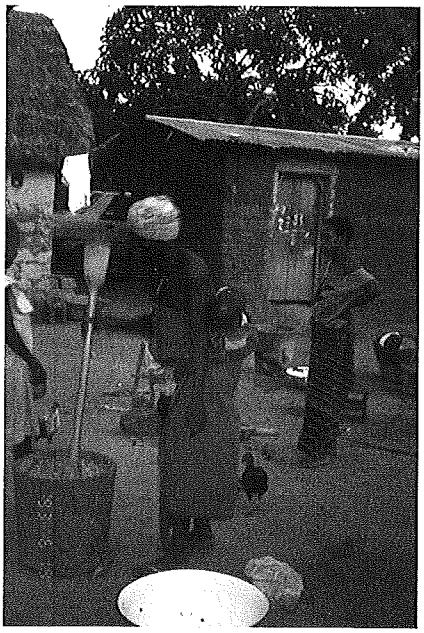

Figure 7.8 Mothers of "clingy" children consider themselves unfortunate. How will they get their work done? (© and photographer Alma Gottlieb).

I was there, Kwame refused to continue indulging his curiosity of a moment before; he remained steadfastly attached to his mother's *pagne*, clinging anxiously to her in my presence.

It is of note that Kwame's social biography was marked by quite special circumstances. As a young girl, his mother – let us call her Au – had a boyfriend, but her father arranged for her to become the second wife of a distant cousin from another village, in accord with the complex rules for arranged marriage that dominate the unions of many Beng villagers even today (Gottlieb, 1986). Au was deeply unhappy over this development and made strenuous efforts to resist the arranged polygynous marriage. In the end, she relented, but her year-long series of rebellions had exacted a toll on her family, whose level of disputes and alcohol consumption on the part of several members was raised from what had already been high.

Soon after she finally settled in with her arranged-marriage husband, Au gave birth, but the infant died. A second baby died as well. A third infant survived, but when she was quite young, probably only around

10 years old, this girl was sent off to live with her mother's younger sister who was living on a plantation in the south of the country. Thus, Kwame – the result of Au's fourth pregnancy – was the only living child who was currently residing with his mother.

Under these circumstances, one might expect that Au herself would have reasons to become more intensely attached to Kwame than most Beng mothers would; she had only one child with her, having lost two to the cruelty of death and a third to being foster-raised far away; and she remained unhappily married as a second wife somewhat far from her natal village and her natal family, from whom in any case she remained somewhat estranged. If a mother in these circumstances might be tempted to emotionally "overinvest" (by the standards of her society) in her infant son, it becomes reasonable to expect that in turn the baby might reciprocally "overinvest" in his mother, becoming "clingy" and wary of strangers. In short, examining the contours of Kwame's case identifies a relatively unusual social universe that may produce "stranger anxiety" in a society that routinely discourages – and fairly successfully so – its development.

The (admittedly intriguing) exception of Kwame (and others like him) aside, one striking result of Beng socialization practices is that Beng infants tend to be oriented towards people more than they are towards objects. This became dramatically clear to me in the course of a study I tried to conduct on the ability of infants (aged 7–20 months) to understand the difference between three-dimensional objects and their two-dimensional representations. In conducting the study in a Beng village, I tried to replicate the laboratory study conditions as much as possible of my North American colleagues who had devised the study (DeLoache *et al.*, 1998). To my great frustration, I simply could not get the babies to cooperate in the ways that my colleagues back in Illinois had been able to achieve in their experiments with American babies.

The problem lay in the fact that it was impossible to isolate the babies in a room with just myself and a video camera because that would never have been permitted by the community. In Beng villages, as in much of West Africa, life is normally meant to be lived outside, enveloped by people (Figure 7.9) (Gottlieb and Graham, 1994); experimental social science research is no exception.

Therefore, surrounding the babies whom I seated on the ground of their courtyards were small crowds of interested onlookers – the babies' mothers or "babysitters" plus a host of curious neighbors, both old and young. Inevitably, it was this group of encircling people that intrigued the infants, far more than the object I was trying to show them, or the picture of the object, or even the very alien technology of an exotic video camera. To put it crudely, people won out over objects for Beng babies

Figure 7.9 In Beng villages, life is normally lived outside (© and photographer Alma Gottlieb).

as the most intriguing sites for their attention. Clearly, these infants had effectively internalized the lessons of their upbringing to date.

As Beng babies grow into young children, they tend to exhibit in delightful ways the training they had as infants that strangers are rarely threatening. One sign of the perceived benevolence of strangers is evident in a game that children play. There is an insect in the Beng region, *tiniŋ kaka*, whose name translates as "stranger insect." This insect is a large, flying, beetle-like creature that makes a loud buzzing sound. Normally these insects are absent in the villages. However, on occasion, they show up unexpectedly, usually in groups. Children become very excited at the appearance of these loudly buzzing, sometimes wildly flying bugs. As soon as the insects appear, the children rummage around for a piece of string or a strip of liana, maybe 2–3 feet (61–91 cm) long. Then they run around the courtyard gaily to catch one of the unlucky insects. They tie it to the string or liana and swing it around their heads as the victim protests with its loud buzz and the children chant gleefully, "*Tiniŋ kaka! Tiniŋ kaka!*" – "Stranger insect! Stranger insect!" (Gottlieb and Graham, 1994, pp. 300–1).

The children start looking around the courtyard, and more often than not, just then a real *tiniŋ* – an unexpected guest/visitor/stranger – indeed

shows up. Adults in the courtyard smile and, if a visiting anthropologist happens to be present, may explain with some smug satisfaction that their worldview has just been vindicated. "See? The *tiniŋ kaka* was an omen – a *tiniŋ* really has come!" Indeed, in many cases I observed, large groups of *tiniŋ* did show up just then for an unanticipated event, especially a funeral of someone who had died suddenly.

Although funerals, of course, produce grief for those in personal mourning, the village at large may take on a somewhat festive atmosphere during a Beng funeral – the more so, the older was the person who died. If the deceased was quite elderly, the atmosphere becomes genuinely carnivalesque (Gottlieb, 1992; Gottlieb and Graham, 1994). Dances are held, everyone dresses in their finest clothes – colorful, matching outfits for both men and women – food is cooked in abundance, youths may mock the deceased in an elaborate charade and march around shouting teasing sexual insults to each other, distant relatives and friends show up to catch up on gossip, new babies are shown off, and chickens are stolen by funeral guests from other villages as part of a structural joking relationship with members of the host village. In these ways, the sudden arrival of the *tiniŋ kaka* frequently signals the arrival of a large group of human *tiniŋ* . . . which in turn – especially for children – signals the arrival of *fun*. We are a long way here from the dominant vision of the stranger-as-menacing-Other that prevails in so much of contemporary, urban societies.

Interpreting strangers and sociability in Beng villages

What accounts for the distinctive pattern of infant and childcare practices and behaviors we have traced in this chapter? Anthropologists are often wary of posing causal scenarios, aware that social life is far too complex, too messy, too overdetermined to be reduced to a single causal factor. At the same time, as social scientists we cannot entirely abjure the effort to explain. What follows, then, is a tentative set of three ideas – concerning religion, economy, and history – that together may go some way in accounting for the childcare patterns and behaviors we have observed. I do not claim that these three factors add up to a complete explanation, but they are certainly part of an explanation.

First, the pattern of welcoming "strangers" into their midst, and the associated habit of encouraging the creation of a broad variety of social ties and attachments, accords well with Beng religious ideology. As I have mentioned, Beng maintain that all babies come to this life after a previous existence in another life, termed *wrugbe*. Thus, the birth of a baby is not seen as the occasion to receive a strange new creature but rather someone

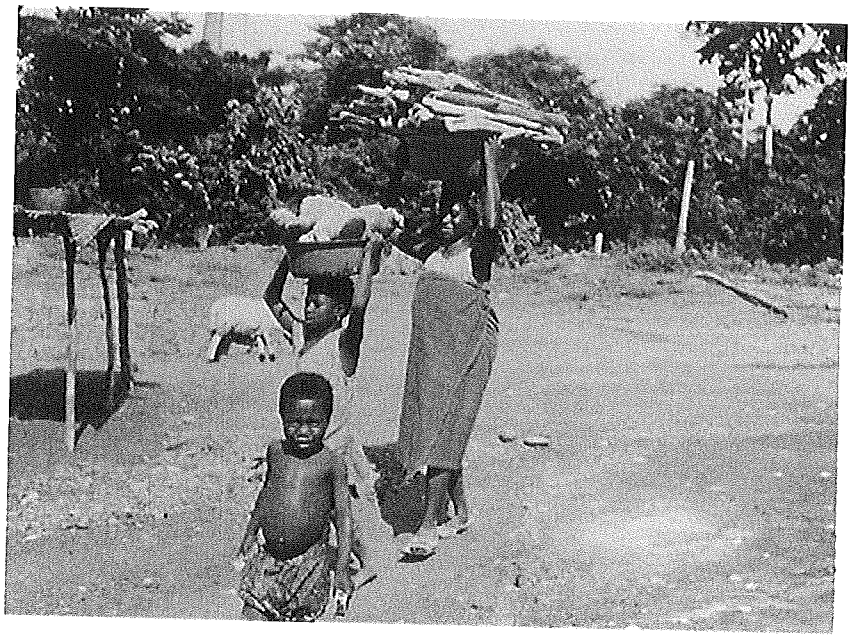

Figure 7.10 Beng women have sole responsibility for chopping and hauling firewood, fetching water, hand-washing the laundry for a large family, and doing the vast majority of food preparation – often while pregnant or breast-feeding (© and photographer Alma Gottlieb).

who has already been here before and then left, to return as a reincarnated ancestor. I suggest that this ideology provides a template for welcoming the "stranger" as a friendly guest with social ties to the community.

At another level, the pattern of encouraging children to form multiple attachments from the earliest days of infancy works well with the demands of women's labor. As has long been documented for rural Africa at large (Boserup, 1970), Beng women have enormous labor demands on their time. In addition to being full-time farmers (growing a large variety of vegetables as well as rice and corn, clearing the underbrush for and weeding the yam fields, and gathering wild forest products, as well as occasionally hunting small game), Beng women have sole responsibility for chopping and hauling firewood from the forest, fetching water for the household water supply, hand-washing the laundry for a large family, and doing the vast majority of food preparation for that family, including pounding, cooking, and dishwashing (Figure 7.10) – much of this while pregnant or breast-feeding.

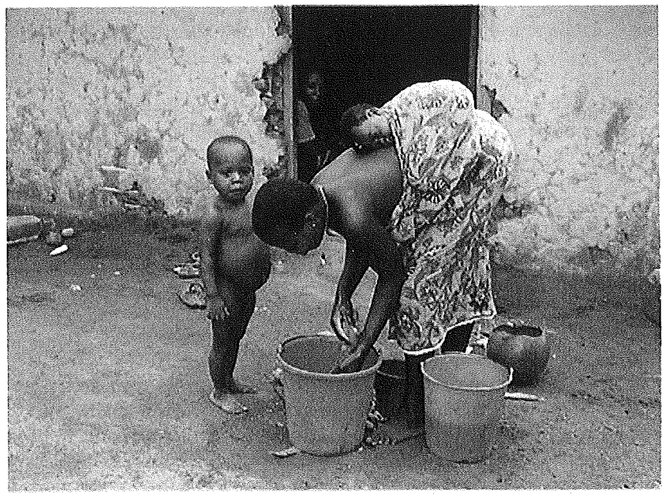

Figure 7.11 It is hard to imagine a woman performing all her demanding work on her own while caring for several small children (including a baby and a toddler) (© and photographer Alma Gottlieb).

It is hard to imagine a woman performing all these tasks continually on her own, day in and day out without relief, while taking full-time care of several small children (including a baby and a toddler) (Figure 7.11).

In order to keep her household running and her share of the family's food supply intact, every mother must arrange either for a single regular babysitter or a network of potential babysitters on whom she can depend for somewhat regular childcare. In this way, the Beng habit of encouraging positive ties to many people, and discouraging the formation of a strong and single attachment to the mother, makes sense in the universe of women's labor.

Finally, there is the obvious question of history. In what sort of historical circumstances would an effort to embrace strangers make sense? Here we are awash in a sea of irony. For at least the brief period for which there is some documented history – barely more than a century – the Beng have appeared to be a relatively remote and insulated group. Surrounded by neighbors speaking languages belonging to different language families (Gottlieb and Murphy, 1995), the Beng have endeavored

to maintain some distance from these neighbors. They have a reputation for a certain spiritual fierceness, due to distinctive ritual practices, that makes many neighbors fear them (Gottlieb, 1992, 1996; Gottlieb and Graham, 1994, 2012). The fact that most Beng overall are noticeably shorter than most other Ivoirian populations also lends them a distinctive physiological profile. Moreover, in times of military threat – at least from the nineteenth-century Muslim crusader, Samori, and perhaps from other military threats as well – they have reacted by retreating into the forest to maintain their pacifist stance of passive resistance, rather than actively engaging in combat or other active resistance; more recently, they fled to distant towns and cities to escape occupying rebels trying to topple the government.[16]

At the same time, this apparent isolationism belies a deep engagement with the neighboring world and beyond. The precolonial Beng economy was based in a long-distance trade in kola nuts, which Jula traders from the north (speaking a distantly related Mande language) came regularly to buy from Beng farmers in their villages. To engage in these critical commercial transactions, most Beng were (and still are) bilingual in Jula. Additionally, there appears to be a fair amount of intermixing of cultural practices (such as naming, family structure, and ritual) with Baule and Ando neighbors speaking Akan languages. As a result, most Beng were (and are) also fluent in Baule and/or Ando. Some Beng were (and continue to be) able to speak Jimini (a dialect of Senufo) spoken by their neighbors to the north with whom they also had commercial and ritual links. In short, despite living deep in the rain forest, having a somewhat distinct physiology, and a reputation for singular cultural practices, the Beng were intricately engaged in regional and long-distance networks for both economic and other forms of commerce. In such a setting, welcoming strangers – and training their children to do so from the earliest stages – must have made a certain sort of economic sense. And until the recent civil war and continuing conflict, routes to a wider world were even more open as Beng farmers sold crops to middlemen who came to the villages from Abidjan to buy their harvest, or Beng traveled to town themselves to sell their wares at a greater profit. Before rebels invaded, engaging productively with strangers continued to be critical to their survival.

[16] They claim to have no knowledge of the slave trade; contemporary Beng aware of this abysmal epoch of African history speculate that their ancestors must have lived (or retreated?) so deeply in the rain forest that they never encountered (or avoided?) the slave traders' nets. Only recently have the Beng begun to convert to Christianity and Islam. For a brief update on their reaction to the nation's recent political and military upheavals, see Gottlieb and Graham (2012, epilogue).

In short, the set of caregiving practices I have noted in this chapter speak to numerous issues relevant to Beng village life in several different arenas. In looking at the treatment of "strangers" and the nature and extent of "attachments" in Beng social life, we are led in a number of different directions at once. More broadly, beyond the Beng, they suggest for child-development researchers that religion, economy, and history may all turn out to be appropriate loci of relevant factors to consider, as attachment theorists continue to chart the social sense that given patterns of infants' "attachments" to a variety of persons make in particular social and historical settings.

Let us conclude by turning to the title of this chapter. Given the distinctive ways in which Beng promote and value "attachments" in their infants, is it time to detach from "attachment theory" as it has classically been configured by Western and Western-trained researchers? If scholars opt to retain "attachment theory" as a viable model relevant to children beyond the middle-class, Euro-American infants for and among whom the theory was developed, the nature of "attachments" not only to mothers but to all relevant individuals in a child's social universe must be investigated inductively, so as to understand from the local perspective the meanings of "attachment" in culturally relevant contexts. Without such a broadening of conceptual approach, "attachment theory" would remain, in effect, a folk theory relevant to only one of the world's many social systems for raising children.

Acknowledgments

In the field, my greatest debt is to the many Beng babies and their caregivers – mothers, sisters, aunts, and others – who put up with my guest/stranger's ways with far more grace than could be expected. For their continuing interest in this and other research in their villages, I remain grateful to my long-time Beng collaborators and friends, Amenan Véronique Akpoueh and Yacouba Kouadio Bah. During summer 1993, three other Beng assistants were also of enormous help in this research: Bertin Kouadio, Augustin Kouakou, and Dieudonné Kwame Kouassi.

For their support of my work researching among and writing about the Beng over the years, I am beholden to the Guggenheim Foundation, the US National Endowment for the Humanities, the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, the Social Science Research Council, the US Information Agency, and several units at the University of Illinois (the Center for Advanced Study, the Research Board, and the Center for African Studies).

I presented earlier versions of this chapter to the Department of Anthropology at the University of Chicago; the Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association Childhood Interest Group – joint meeting with the Society for Anthropological Sciences and the 39th Annual Meeting of the Society for Cross-Cultural Research (February 17–20, 2010), Albuquerque, New Mexico; the Wenner-Gren Conference on Alloparenting in Human Societies (London); and the Center for African Studies, and the Interdisciplinary Faculty Seminar on the Stranger, both at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. I am grateful for the stimulating questions and comments I received among all audiences. For helping me orient myself in the attachment literature and productively challenging my reading of it, I am thankful to my colleague and friend, the developmental psychologist Judy DeLoache. Different versions of this chapter appear in print elsewhere (Gottlieb, 2004; and, by permission, Gottlieb, 2009).

At a personal level, I offer my continuing thanks for their emotional support to my husband Philip Graham and our children, Hannah and Nathaniel Gottlieb-Graham, to all of whom I am forever quite firmly attached.

Pronunciation guide to some Beng words:

Transcriptions of some Beng words in this chapter use characters from the International Phonetic Alphabet, which are pronounced as follows:

ŋ pronounced "ng" as in "sing"
ɔ pronounced "aw" as in "bawl"
ɛ pronounced "eh" as in "bet".

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Different Faces *of* Attachment

Cultural Variations on a Universal Human Need

EDITED BY
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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

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Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107027749

First published 2014

Printed in the United Kingdom by Clays, St Ives plc

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data
Different faces of attachment: cultural variations on a universal human need / edited by Hiltrud Otto and Heidi Keller.
pages cm
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-1-107-02774-9 (hardback)
1. Attachment behavior 2. Attachment behavior – Cross-cultural studies. 3. Attachment behavior in children – Cross-cultural studies. 4. Child psychology – Cross-cultural studies. I. Otto, Hiltrud, 1977– II. Keller, Heidi, 1945–
BF575.A86D54 2014
155.9'2 – dc23 2014007617

ISBN 978-1-107-02774-9 Hardback