

LANDSCAPES: THE ARTS, AESTHETICS, AND EDUCATION

Knowing Bodies, Moving Minds

Towards Embodied Teaching and Learning

Edited by
Liora Bresler

Kluwer Academic Publishers

ALMA GOTTLIEB

FOREWORD:

FALLING INTO TRUST

"The body is a mirror that limns the observer's gaze and the object of that gaze, reflecting one back upon the other."

(Roberts and Roberts 1996, p. 86)

In Beng villages in the rain forest of Côte d'Ivoire, children learn critical life lessons through the body. On any given day, one might notice children of varying ages—as young as three, as old as fourteen or fifteen—playing the falling dance/game of *lolondale*. A small group of children, usually no more than a dozen or so, forms a circle. Everyone claps hands and gaily sings the nonsense words to a short ditty that accompanies the playful routine. Half the children sing one line, then the other half repeat those words in an echo that serves as a variation on the common call-and-response vocal style of many African musical traditions. Altogether, only five short lines comprise the entire song:

No no

No no

Nona nofi

Nona nofi

Siyagita

Siyagita

Bandarandara

Bandarandara

Hooptageti!

Hooptageti!

Right after the children start singing this lively tune, one of them volunteers to stand in the center of the ring, surrounded by her playmates in an enveloping circle. As the singing children reach the final line of the air, the child in the middle deliberately falls backwards. As she does so, all the other children of the circle extend their arms outwards to catch the girl so that she falls backwards not onto the hard ground, where she would hurt herself, but into the soft but strong, waiting arms of her young friends and relatives, who keep her safe. Then the children gently bounce her upright, leaving her to regain her balance and rejoin the circle. Right away, another child jumps into the middle and the children start singing again,

climaxed with the new girl in the center falling backwards to land, as her predecessor just did, in the protective arms of her companions.

Often the dancing circle consists entirely of girls, but sometimes boys join in. Children start observing this dance activity from birth, as the game is performed outside in public view, where babies spend much of their days from dawn to dusk (Gottlieb, 2003). As soon as they are old enough to walk unassisted without falling, toddlers may begin haltingly to join in the game; by three years of age, many are regularly participating. Thus *lolondale* often attracts a multi-age group: children as old as pre-teens participate routinely, and teenagers may join in if they have time off from their work. In the right mood, if they find themselves unexpectedly free from the multiple demands of full-time farming plus full-time domestic work, even the odd young, married woman may join in a round of *lolondale* on occasion.

The game of *lolondale* is, most obviously, a quite enjoyable diversion; from an aesthetic perspective, it is, as well, a graceful performance that is actually more choreographed than its spontaneous nature might imply. At yet another level, I propose, the song-and-dance routine is also a serious educational project. For educators know that all children's games, no matter how apparently trivial, teach significant lessons and values.¹ What are the lessons and values taught by *lolondale*?

I suggest that the major aim of this body game is to teach the very serious lesson that life is in good part about trust. In Beng villages, this is an important lesson that begins at birth and is often taught through the body. Immediately after childbirth, for example, a long line of wellwishers forms outside the doorway of the house in which the newly delivered woman gave birth. Ideally, a member of each household in the village comes to congratulate the woman and engage with the baby. And the baby's mother or grandmother typically offers the visitor a chance to hold the baby—an offer that is often accepted.

In the weeks following this postpartum ritual, the Beng infant continues to be introduced somatically to visitors: normally, someone who travels from another village to visit a new baby should immediately be handed the child to hold. In reality, the guest may decline the chance to hold the baby. However, it is generally considered imperative to make the offer, whether that person is a relative or a stranger.

For all such visits, it is optimal for the baby to be awake so that the two can be properly introduced, according to formal greeting routines (see Gottlieb, 2003, Chapter 6). Of course this exchange could be problematic if—as happens often in the lives of infants—the baby happens to be sleeping when a guest arrives. In such cases, it is common to awaken the little one to be handed over to the visitor, especially for high-status guests, relatives visiting from afar, or relatives from the other side of a large village who do not get to see the baby every day.² Right from the start, then, a baby becomes used to being passed around from person to person, trained to trust the strong arms holding him (and, later, the strong back that will carry him).

Indeed, after the first two to three months of life—once the mother returns to working in her fields—a typical Beng baby does not spend more than an hour or two at a time with any given person. In a quantitative study that I conducted,³ the most common length of time that infants remained with a given caretaker was a mere five minutes. The next most common duration for remaining with a single caretaker was ten minutes; after that, the next three most common durations were fifteen, twenty

and twenty-five minutes, respectively (the latter two times were tied for fourth place). During the 41 two-and-a-quarter-hour sessions that we observed, the babies were engaged with an average of 2.2 people, but in many cases they were engaged with three to four people, and in two cases they were engaged with five or six people.⁴

In Beng villages, the somatic teaching of trust extends from holding the baby to breastfeeding. For the Beng, breastfeeding is a social act, and a biological mother is only one of many potential breastfeeders who may nurse a young infant. A casual attitude toward wet nursing offered as an improvisatory feeding strategy produces the possibility that Beng babies experience the breast as a site not just of nourishment but also of sociability (cf. Kitzinger, 1995, p. 390).⁵

One result of such high levels of social stimulation is that few Beng babies develop the sort of "stranger anxiety" that is common among middle-class, Euro-American babies toward the end of the first year and stretching into the second year. Indeed, Beng mothers actively endeavor to prevent the development of "stranger anxiety" and disapprove actively of the few babies who show signs of it.⁶ A baby should agreeably go to anyone, even a stranger; a baby who cries on being given to an unknown person is insultingly called "*gbālE*," or clingy.

In emphasizing this set of early childcare practices and games of young childhood, I do not wish to imply that social life in Beng villages creates an idyllic setting in which communal child care and universal trust govern all daily interactions. Indeed, later, as children mature into adults, Beng youth learn different lessons beyond their early training to trust a wide variety of people. They will learn the more morally problematic lesson that not all people are in fact to be trusted—that there are, in particular, many who pose a threat to their wellbeing through their strong mystical powers of witchcraft.⁷ But at the young age at which babies are routinely passed around and, in a few years, children begin participating in *lolondalE*, teaching trust is much more important than is teaching suspicion. Life in this face-to-face community demands it.

Several years after observing *lolondalE* in Beng villages, I found myself teaching an introductory class in anthropology to a group of some two hundred students. The course met in a large room of fixed seats and attached desks—just the sort of enormous and impersonal lecture hall I myself had managed to avoid while a student at a small, liberal arts college. Trying to deconstruct the institutional rigidities of the unforgiving space, with its implicit assumption that the teacher knows all and the students know nothing, I decided one day to enliven the unit on childhood cross-culturally by bringing Beng games into the lecture hall. Without offering much preview—surprise and drama are, after all, two of the few delights we can offer in such grim pedagogical settings—I simply asked for a few brave volunteers to join me on the stage and try out a West African game. Several courageous students climbed the stairs to meet the challenge, and I positioned them in a circle, recruiting one to stand in the center. They eyed me expectantly, awaiting instructions. First, I gave the small group a singing lesson, teaching them the Beng song that accompanies *lolondalE*. Then I told the students in the outer ring to hold out their arms, and I instructed the student in the center to fall backwards, into the waiting arms of her companions in this venture. A murmur went through the lecture hall: the

rest of the students were clearly worried about the fate of their classmate. *What if they didn't catch her and she fell onto the hard wooden floor*, they seemed to be thinking, *wouldn't she risk a serious injury?* The student in the center of the circle—and the center of all this attention—hesitated. She giggled nervously, looked around cautiously at the outstretched arms surrounding her, raised her eyebrows, giggled nervously some more, . . . and remained firmly upright. I teased her gently: “Don’t you trust your classmates? Can’t you see they’re waiting to catch you?” She still looked nervous, but perhaps she was now thinking, *Can I pass this course if I don’t follow the teacher’s instructions?* I feared I might be on the edge of abusing my pedagogical authority. Still, I tried one last mild tease, and the student allowed herself to fall backwards—slowly, barely. Her classmates caught her, and she jumped quickly into the edge of the circle, showing evident relief. *Narrow escape*, she seemed to be thinking.

I gently taunted the group some more.

“See, it was easy? She didn’t fall, you all caught her beautifully. Who’ll try next?” I expected an eager volunteer from among the outer circle. None came forth. *Sure, they’d managed to catch the first student without causing injury, but could we repeat this feat a second time?* They were perhaps worrying. I decided to end my pedagogical abuse and thanked the brave group, then returned to my impromptu lecture.

The students’ reluctance had supported my point quite dramatically: seemingly innocuous children’s games teach important lessons in values that a given society endorses. To put the contrast at its starkest, in our society, games teach, above all, the value of competition; in Beng villages, *lolondalE* teaches the value of cooperation. In both cases, they do so in good part by aesthetic lessons imparted through the body.

In the chapters that follow, you will be treated to a wide variety of case studies of such lessons. This book blazes new paths in exploring the myriad ways in which the body both encodes cultural values and creates personal meanings. From Japanese preschoolers roughhousing to the epistemological knowledge imparted by dance/drama education in American elementary schools, you will read of dramatic and subtle ways alike in which cultural values are etched through artistic-somatic techniques. From the repression of young children’s sensuality in American day care centers to the overt celebration of sensuality in Namibian dances that also celebrate political resistance to (current or past) oppressive regimes, the authors of these chapters explore the multiple ways in which the body is artistically configured and refigured. A remarkable discussion of teen jazz dance classes in California youth detention centers reminds us poignantly of how bodily interventions reshape people’s consciousness—in some cases charted in that chapter, reorienting people’s lives to imagine new life plans beyond prison bars. Across the world, people learn critical life lessons—sometimes destructive, sometimes productive, but always palpable—through aesthetic engagements with the body. This is a bold book filled with a dazzling array of aesthetic-bodily engagements around the world; prepare to experience the cerebral version of yogic enlightenment.

ENDNOTES

¹For one ethnographic example from West Africa, see Lancy (1996).

²The practice of waking a sleeping baby to introduce to visitors has been documented elsewhere in West Africa (e.g. among the Fulani—see Riesman 1992:113, Johnson 2000:185) and may be fairly common on the continent.

³I carried out this quantitative portion of my research with the assistance of Dieudonné Kwame Kouassi, whose assistance I acknowledge here with gratitude. In total, we observed 25 babies in 43 observational sessions over a total of 5,745 minutes, or 95.75 hours. Of the 43 sessions, 41 were 135 minutes in duration; 1 was 120 minutes in duration; and 1 was 90 minutes in duration. The babies ranged in age from three months to twenty-four months, with the average age being 11.4 months.

⁴For tables, see Gottlieb (2003: Chapter 6).

⁵For more on Beng breastfeeding practices, see Gottlieb (2003: Chapter 8).

⁶For more on "stranger anxiety" in Beng villages, see Gottlieb (2003: Chapter 6).

⁷For more on Beng witchcraft, see Gottlieb (1989), Gottlieb and Graham (1994).

REFERENCES

- Gottlieb, A. (1989). Witches, kings, and the sacrifice of identity; or, the power of paradox and the paradox of power among the Beng of Ivory Coast. In W. Arens & I. Karp (Eds.), *Creativity of power: Cosmology and action in African societies* (pp. 245–272). Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Gottlieb, A. (in press). *The afterlife is where we come from: Infants and the culture of infancy in West Africa*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Graham, P. (1994/1993). *Parallel worlds: An anthropologist and a writer encounter Africa*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Johnson, M. (2000). The view from the *Wuro*: A guide to child rearing for Fulani parents. In J. DeLoache & A. Gottlieb (Eds.), *A world of babies: Imagined childcare guides for seven societies* (pp. 171–198). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Kitzinger, S. (1995). Commentary: Breastfeeding: Biocultural perspectives. In P. Stuart-Macadam & K. A. Dettwyler (Eds.), *Breastfeeding: Biocultural perspectives* (pp. 385–394). Hawthorne, NY: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Lancy, D. (1996). *Playing on the mother-ground: Cultural routines for children's development*. New York: Guilford.
- Riesman, P. (1992). *First find your child a good mother: The construction of self in two African communities* (David L. Szanton, Lila Abu-Lughod, Sharon Hutchinson, Paul Stoller & Carol Trosset, Eds.). New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Roberts, M. N., & Roberts, A. F. (1996). Body Memory: Part I: Defining the Person. In M. N. Roberts & A. F. Roberts (Eds.), *Memory: Luba art and the making of history* (pp. 84–115). New York: The Museum for African Art.

The notion of *embodiment*, coined by Bryan Turner, is related to the shift from "the librating body" to "the desiring body"—a locale for pleasure and playfulness (Turner, 1996). I see this shift as closely connected to the widening gap between schools and the outside world (cf. Sarason, 1990). As *Grande Idee*, embodiment has profound implications for many areas of society, but particularly for education and the ways we think about how children learn, how teachers can teach, and how schools could be organized. There is a vital need to examine what somatic modes of cognition, thought, and action are, and ways of attending to and with one's body in surroundings that include the embodied presence of others" (Csordas, 1999, p. 151), mean for pedagogy and for curriculum.

The body played an important role in various ancient philosophies and cultures, including the Greek and the Celtic. In Hinduism the body has been regarded as a vehicle to free the mind. In particular, the philosophy of yoga claims that the