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hyenas and heteroglossia: myth and ritual among the Beng of Côte d'Ivoire

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In recent years there has been a salutary "opening up" of anthropology in ways that have encouraged the asking of new questions and the inclusion of new types of complexity and tension in our analytic models (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Turner and Bruner 1986). While this general tendency has taken several directions, these paths have been seen as constituting a loosely unified trend, indicated by the rubric "practice anthropology" (Ortner 1984). In this article I offer a particular strand of this admittedly heterogeneous collection of theory by exploring how different, culturally defined levels of a single society may be characterized by mutual disjunction. In this case, the disjunction takes the form of opposed ideologies that exist in two separate realms of experience in a particular society. The analysis focuses specifically on the contrasting roles played by hyenas in both myth and ritual among the Beng of Côte d'Ivoire.

In focusing on Beng hyenas, I follow Sapir (1981), whose article on hyenas, lepers, and blacksmiths among the Kujamaat Diola of Senegal (linguistically unrelated to the Beng) serves as a model of careful symbolic analysis of hyena anatomy. Following Sapir, I also investigate the ritual place of hyenas, focusing on how a dying hyena is dealt with by a human passerby. Both Beng and Kujamaat Diola show a striking interest in the death of a hyena. But whereas the Kujamaat take the event as an occasion for elevating the hyena to human status, the Beng view the hyena's death as perversely dangerous to human morality. As Sapir argues, the hyena may well be a "natural symbol" because of its peculiar anatomy, but as he shows for the Diola, its specific meanings may be culturally variable indeed.

Among the Beng, the system of hyena meanings incorporates visions of anatomy that emerge most clearly in their corpus of myths and rituals. In each of these two realms the hyena serves as a meta-commentary on certain aspects of Beng social life, but this commentary diverges from medium to medium. In myth, Hyena's perceived flaws and antisocial acts are laughed at; in contrast, ritual action takes the perceived defects of actual hyenas quite seriously. Myth and ritual do not reflect but rather distort each other. Put another way, each realm exists in tacit, complementary relationship, entering into an unspoken mutual discourse—though no direct dialogue is created (Bruner and Gorfain 1984:68). Implicit in my discussion is a model of society as multileveled, with each level at least partially autonomous. I analyze the relationship between these two "statements" made by myth and ritual through Bakhtin's concept of "heteroglossia," which permits us to focus on contradictory realms of experience.

By focusing on how the Beng depict hyenas in oral literature and how they treat living hyenas in ritual activities, this article explores how each of these domains makes radically different statements about a single subject. In both cases, hyenas represent a form of subversion of society, but the value such subversion is given contrasts dramatically in the two realms under discussion. Bakhtin's concept of "heteroglossia" is used as a model for analyzing how two distinct realms of meaning in a single society may exist in mutual contradiction. [symbolic anthropology, myth, ritual, animal symbolism, laughter, West Africa]

In this essay I refer to “myth” where some might prefer “folktale.” Many folklorists posit that myths must concern ultimate truths and issues of explicitly cosmological significance, as Dundes (1972:93) put it, embodying “a sacred oral narrative explaining how the earth or men came to be in their present form,” and so by definition they are said to concern deities and their actions (Bascom 1965). By these standards, Ruth Finnegan (1970:362) has effectively eliminated myths from Africa altogether. However, I would contend that forms of seeming entertainment such as the Hyena stories recounted here do indeed offer serious moral lessons about the world, albeit in a fashion that allows for amusement on the part of the listeners. Moreover, the same Beng stories may have as their protagonists both animals and “deities” (forest spirits and the Sky), thus confounding the folklorists’ distinction of story type on this basis (see Bascom 1965).¹ For these reasons I resist demoting Beng Hyena stories to the category of folktale, perceived commonly as both less influential in social life and less weighty in philosophical speculation.

This article forms a dialogue with another recent work (Gottlieb 1986c). While the earlier piece presented an analysis of mythology as existing in essential harmony with other aspects of society, the present essay offers an alternative approach. As complementary interpretations of different components of the Beng mythological corpus, I will argue that there is room for both “styles” of interpretation within a single culture.

the mythical Beng hyena²

In Beng myths, Hyena appears to represent a clear-cut morality tale: he always displays greed coupled with stupidity, and his stupidity prevents him from indulging his greed to his full satisfaction. For this reason, Hyena is seen as a foolish creature, and the telling of Hyena tales is always accompanied by much laughter from the audience.

Hyena’s role in Beng myths parallels that found elsewhere on the African continent: many Africanists have remarked that the mythological Hyena is often seen as morally bankrupt. Jackson, for example, describes the role of the mythical Hyena among the Kuranko of Sierra Leone in terms that could easily apply to the Beng corpus:

[Hyena] acts blindly, selfishly, and instinctively. . . . The Hyena can never integrate his intentions with the consequences of his actions; he lives in a world of emotion and impulse, a world pervaded by his own subjectivity [1982:112].

Similar views of the mythical Hyena emerge from the Kaguru of Tanzania (Beidelman 1961, 1963, 1975) to the Dogon, Bamana, Bozo, and Fulani of the Western Sudan (Calame-Griaule and Ligers 1961), and the Kujamaat Diola of Senegal (Sapir 1981:532–533). Yet, given varying social contexts, similar myths take on vastly different burdens of meaning. The moral bankruptcy of the mythical Hyena as well as the ways in which hyenas are treated in everyday life reveal much about the specific contours of Beng culture and its varying views on social conformity and rebellion. Let us begin, then, by considering a typical Hyena narrative from the Beng repertoire, which I have named “Hyena and the Fish.”

Hyena and the Fish³

Here’s one of my stories. They say there was a river that had fish in it. The river dried up and the fish said they’d better move and go into another river. It’s then that Hare, who was passing by, saw them. He said, “Where are you going?” They said, “We were in the big river over there but it dried up, so we’re going to another river. Choose two of us to take for yourself: one to sacrifice, the other to eat.” So Hare went off to sacrifice and eat his two fish.

As for Hyena, when he went and saw the fish . . . the dummy started dancing, enjoying himself sweetly. Then he said, “I’m not going to take only two, I’m going to go get a basket and cart and I’ll come back and gather you all up.” All the while he was dancing, dancing, following the fish.

Then he left them to go get his wives, the basket and the cart. He returned with his wives, but the fish were already on the river bank. He shot out a paw to grab some of them, plem! But he was too late: the fish had already gone into the water. He grabbed one to give to his children, but it slipped out of his hand and went to the bottom of the river. And that's how Hyena is stupid.

In this Hyena myth, as with others, the moral lesson is stated clearly: "And that's how Hyena is stupid." Hyena's inability to foresee the consequences of his actions prevents the full exercise of his avarice. The implication is that in the end, greed, which is incompatible with wisdom, will always be thwarted. The temptation to satisfy unreasonable desires at the expense of others is doomed to defeat. Certainly Hyena's continual failures would seem to present this message to those, including children, who sit around the courtyard fire late at night listening to the storytelling sessions. Yet listeners, both child and adult, take pleasure—perhaps guilty pleasure—in hearing of Hyena's attempts at indulging his selfish whims. It may be that Hyena's motives, while condemned, are secretly admired by many, as a seductive challenge to what is considered acceptable social behavior.

In other myths Hyena is represented not only as stupid, greedy, or opposed to human interests, he may also be portrayed as a Muslim (cf. Calame-Griaule and Ligers 1961:95). As such he is separated from the moral universe that traditional Beng recognize as giving meaning to their lives (see Note 2). In one myth, for example, Hyena's status as a Muslim is used to show how he can undermine the basis of Beng magical practices:

The King, Hyena, and the Bird⁴

There was a little Bird whose feathers were sought by the old people of the village. They needed the feathers to give to the king.⁵ Three (Snake, Hyena and Lion) were chosen by the king to go look for the Bird.

They went into the forest and Snake went into Bird's nest where the eggs were. Lion was hidden where there was a very thick stand of thatch. Hyena hid behind the kapok tree. All the while, the Bird was watching them. The birds were flying back to the nest, kpli kpli kpli. . . . The ɓɓɓ Bird sang [in Dyula]:

*"Here I am, I see you,
The Snake is sitting on my eggs in the nest,
The Lion is hiding in a thicket,
The Hyena is hiding behind the kapok tree."*

Hyena stayed behind the kapok tree, but he wasn't very well hidden, and he laughed, "Hú hú hú, I hid behind the kapok tree, but Bird's seen me!" The birds flew off, kpli kpli kpli [knowing there was trouble here].

The three returned to the king and recounted their story. . . . The king told them to go back again and make another try. The king advised Hyena not to laugh this time. The three returned to the spot, and the birds flew back too, but . . . Hyena started laughing again. The three returned to the king again and told him. . . . The king said, "This time . . . Hyena will take Lion's place in the thatch and Lion will take Hyena's place behind the kapok tree." [They did so with the same results.] . . .

So the three went back to the king. . . . The king said, "This time, Hyena won't go; just Snake and Lion will go together."

Lion went and hid in the thicket, and Snake hid in the bird's nest with the eggs. The ɓɓɓ Bird started singing:

"This time the Hyena is gone."

The birds all flew off, kpli kpli kpli, into their nests, and Snake caught the ɓɓɓ Bird and brought it back to the king.

Everyone in the region went and met in the king's village . . . to hear of the news. That same day, they sent Hyena off to another village to announce a funeral. When he was returning from announcing the funeral, he found everyone walking down the road, with Bird, to the king's village.

When Hyena reached the village, he went to the house of the village chief. First he went inside, then he went out and walked around the house a few times. He went and got his big bubu [gown; see below].

Snake and Lion were bringing the Bird, but just as they were about to enter the village, Bird started singing,

"Here I am, I see you,
The Snake is sitting on my eggs in the nest,
The Lion is hiding in a thicket,
The Hyena is hiding behind the kapok tree."

At this, Hyena started dancing, and danced all the way from the house to meet the arriving party. By the time he got there, his bubu was all ripped. He walked around the village chief's house, walked around, walked around the house. He even started beating the funeral drums. But that's not what he was sent for. Everyone was supposed to watch out that Hyena didn't approach Bird, since he'd been excluded from the group. But it wasn't the case!

When everyone went to the public meeting place to set things up for the funeral, they forgot about Bird and left him at the chief's house. But Hyena hadn't forgotten. . . .

When Hyena went up to Bird, he said, "Eh! Eh! Eh! Eh! You really see people! Eh! When I left my first hiding spot and hid elsewhere, you saw me; when I was hiding behind the kapok tree, was it my name you called out? Sing the song again, I want to hear it." Bird said, "No, I can't sing it here. . . ." Hyena said, "If you sing, it'll make me very happy. Sing it, let me hear." The Bird said, "If you want me to sing it, you have to take off your big bubu in front of me. Move back, take off your big bubu, and untie my feet for me, let me be free. . . ."

Hyena said, "Start singing first. Sing the song once, then I'll untie your feet." So Bird started singing [the same song]. Hyena started laughing, "Ùhhú ùhhú ùhhú, really, you sing it well, sing it again for me." But Bird said, "I don't want to sing, really, but I'm doing it secretly, for you. Now you want me to do it again!" Hyena said, "Yes, sing it again!" Bird said, "First, untie my feet, then I'll sing."

So Hyena untied the feet, and Bird started singing [as before]. Hyena started dancing, turning around, and Bird flew off, kpff.

Meanwhile, everyone at the public meeting place heard the sounds of Hyena dancing. They saw Bird flying off and started yelling, "Catch him! Catch him!" Some started jumping up to catch hold of him. One barely caught hold but only managed to get some feathers, and Bird flew off. Those who got some feathers were the ones who are now wealthy.

This myth emphasizes Hyena's greediness: his insistence on two songs results ultimately in Bird's escape and the loss of Bird's feathers, considered by the animist Beng to be symbolically efficacious charms (see Note 5). Perhaps it is because he is a Muslim that Hyena acts to undermine traditional Beng religion.

Yet in neglecting his *bubu*, Hyena debases his own religion, Islam. The *bubu*, an ankle-length, long-sleeved gown, worn by Muslim men on special occasions such as weddings and funerals, is seen by the Beng as a sign of adherence to Islam. Hyena rips his *bubu* in dancing for Bird, then happily takes it off at Bird's request. Hyena not only challenges Beng animism, he is not even a good Muslim. How can such a religious lightweight be given respect? It is appropriate, then, that at strategic points in the story, Hyena himself cannot keep from guffawing, giving away his hiding place and foiling the group's plans. Perhaps even Hyena cannot take himself seriously.

In another myth, Hyena is depicted as utterly opposed not only to the interests of humans, but to their very existence. In this myth ("The Dispersal of All the Animals"),⁶ Hyena endeavors to persuade all the other animals to destroy a human couple, who may be the primal representatives of their species. However, thanks to Dog, who informs the man and woman, the plan fails and the couple survives. Here the attitude to Hyena takes on a more serious tone. Acting selfishly in the other myths, Hyena readily provokes laughter in his audience, but in this myth his selfishness has become more dangerous. We are approaching the more wary attitude that Beng have toward the actual hyenas with which they may have come in contact.

For if Beng are for the most part amused by the mythical Hyena with his antisocial character flaws, they hold a different attitude toward living hyenas, which represent a profoundly disturbing potential for causing mayhem to human society and are thus seen not as amusing but as terrifying. We look first at how Beng view the anatomy and behavior of hyenas and then consider how Beng deal with these through ritual action.

hyena anatomy and habits

Beng do praise the hyenas' great running speed, remarking that the spotted hyena (*Crocuta crocuta*) can outrun a dog.⁷ But this may be their only admirable trait. Beyond that, their monstrous and anomalous features are negatively valued (cf. Douglas 1966; also Bulmer 1967; Leach 1964; Tambiah 1969).

When asked to describe a hyena, Beng remark on its fur, which they describe as *frika* or *fri fràyè* ("variegated-striped" or "mottled"). Beng do not admire mottled appearances, preferring an even, monochromatic look or, barring that, crisp stripes or other clearly delineated patterns. They think the hyena is simply ugly (for a similar Kaguru view, see Beidelman 1986:186). They account for its ungainly coat in a myth ("Hyena, Lion, the Worker, and Forced Labor"), which I summarize briefly.⁸ Hyena took advantage of Lion's absence by trying to sell an animal that was hired by Lion to work in his fields. When Lion discovered this, he grabbed at Hyena trying to catch him, but he only managed to snatch him with his claws, producing the variegated-striped pattern the hyena has today. Thus the hyena's fur is seen as the result of an immoral deed he once committed in myth.

Hyenas not only look ugly to the Beng, but they also move about at inappropriate times. They have a habit of traveling during nighttime, particularly to hunt (Grzimek 1975:186). Beng have seized upon this trait, calling the animal *yiruyali* or "night walker." Beng are especially mistrustful of night creatures, for, like many other Africans, they see night as a time of sinful activities, especially witchcraft (cf., for example, Beidelman 1975; Jackson 1982:54–56; Needham 1978; Winter 1963:292). All night travel is virtually forbidden; those who do leave the village after dark are said to be either foolish or witches. Indeed, the occasional car that passes by after dusk is said to be the victim of a witch, transformed into a vehicle by the latter, who is driving it off somewhere to be eaten later (Gottlieb 1986d). (The nocturnal habits of hyenas may account for their being assigned as witches' familiars in other parts of Africa, as for example among the Shona of southern Africa [Lan 1985:36], the Kujamaat Diola of Senegal [Sapir 1981], and several Western Sudanic peoples [Calame-Griaule and Ligers 1961].)

Hyenas also eat inappropriate food. They are perfectly capable of hunting their own meat (Kruuk 1972:106ff), a fact the Beng recognize, as they used to tie up sheep and goats inside the courtyard to protect them from the hyenas that were once in the area (cf. Sapir 1981:536 and Walker 1964:1265). But it is hyenas' occasional scavenging that seems to have caught the attention, and criticism, of most Africans, including the Beng. Indeed, Kruuk tells us that "the hyena shows some morphological and physiological features which make it the supreme utilizer of every bone or scrap of animal remains," including special bone-crushing third premolars and other shearing teeth (Kruuk 1972:107); thus, unlike other animals, hyenas can eat and fully digest the largest bones of even sizable game such as the East African wildebeest and zebra (Kruuk 1972:108). Perhaps it is because they are hunters that the Beng find the notion of scavenging so repulsive. In any case, hyena meat is taboo to all Beng.⁹

The ossiferous nature of the hyenas' scavenging diet produces feces that are starkly white, from the powdery, calcium-rich remains of scavenged bones (Kruuk 1972:107–108). Beng comment on the uniqueness of such white feces in the animal kingdom (indeed, this feature appears as a major plot mover in a Beng myth, "Dog, Hyena, the Mothers and the Names,"¹⁰ in which Hare traces the path of Hyena's white feces), and they emphasize their disgust at the sight.

Not only do hyenas prey on animal carcasses, they also scavenge on human ones. Throughout Africa, hyenas have a nasty habit of coming into villages at night and digging up fresh corpses. This is particularly troublesome to the Beng, for their religion includes a strict taboo (*sō pɔ*) against the unearthing of human corpses under any circumstances. The violation of this taboo (in the case of a police autopsy of a suspicious death) results in pollution of the Earth spirits, requiring a series of atonement sacrifices, usually offered by the village chief, to lift the pollution.

Nowadays, there are few hyenas left in Bengland—most have gone north to the savanna regions—but the Beng say that within living memory, the numerous hyenas present in the region were a risk to new burials.¹¹ Therefore, after a funeral, the corpse would have been buried in the village and a high gate erected around the tomb. For a few weeks after the burial, while the corpse was still decomposing, a light would be kept burning all night inside the gate to frighten off the hyenas. However, if one had died from what the Beng classify as a polluting disease—leprosy, elephantiasis, or suicide—the corpse was buried in the forest rather than the village. In this case, the cadaver would be left to its own fate, unprotected against hyenas (cf. Bloch and Parry 1982:15–18, on “bad deaths”).

The taboo against unearthing a human corpse derives from a wider premise of Beng religion that a discrete division of space must be maintained for various beings and that specific activities may take place only in certain culturally defined zones. For example, sex, menstruation, and childbirth (human fertility) are restricted to the village, while agricultural activities (crop fertility) are restricted to the forest (Gottlieb 1988a). Moreover, humans live in the village while invisible spirits live in the forest;¹² accordingly, since a certain class of forest spirits are said to communicate by whistling, humans may whistle only in the forest, not in the village.

Humans must defecate only in the forest, never in the village, and only in certain spots that are far from the dwellings of the invisible forest spirits. Should a human unknowingly defecate on the soil that is part of a forest spirits’ village, it is said that the spirits will punish the sinner with illness, misfortune, or even death. If many people violate this rule, the offended spirits may try to burn down their human village.

Violation of these boundaries brings on retribution (by spirits against humans) or disaster (by animals against humans). The rule that human cadavers must remain underground is part of a system that dictates the proper spatial arrangement for various beings and activities. When hyenas disturb human tombs they threaten a wider set of spatial categories that should remain discrete. (Cf. Calame-Griaule and Ligers [1961], who highlight the village-bush distinction that characterizes human-hyena relations.)

Given the hyenas’ desires to raid human burials, there is also the potential that their excretions will contain fully digested human remains. In this case, the human corpse, disturbed in its underground resting place and taken into the forest to be eaten, would be re-deposited as feces in the village. Such a cycle would be the perverse triumph of a forest animal processing village humans as food. Alternatively, any human bones in the hyena feces might come from the forest burials of polluted persons (such as lepers) exiled from the village. Their illicit return to the village by way of hyena feces would be yet another level of perversion, a violation of the banishment to the forest of cadavers deemed outside the scope of human society and unworthy of funerals.

While no Beng ever mentioned this, the white feces of hyenas resemble balls of kaolin, the powdery white clay that the Beng utilize on innumerable occasions as ritual body paint to attract protective spirits.¹³ If this association is indeed relevant, hyena feces would appear to be a monstrous parody of a primary ingredient (and color) in the Beng religious palette.

So far, we have isolated several anatomical and ecological traits of the hyena that the Beng have seized upon as signs of their abnormality. These include mottled fur, nocturnal traveling, scavenging animal and human remains, and white feces.¹⁴ In dwelling critically upon these anomalous features, Beng reveal their discomfort with the living hyena and its habits. In the

following section I explore two ritual treatments that Beng prescribe in relation to actual hyenas that reveal dramatically how threatening Beng find the flesh-and-blood hyena and its violations of human norms and boundaries.

ritual and the hyena

Preoccupied by an anatomical peculiarity in the hyena, the Beng have observed that for a short period after a hyena dies, its rectum moves in and out.¹⁵ In describing this, my informant said that the body part “breathes like a heart”; to illustrate the process he rhythmically curled and uncurled his hand into a fist. In drawing this analogy, I suggest, he was emphasizing the component of life that the heart represents. For a heart, or any other organ, to continue moving (allegedly) after the creature’s death is certainly a contradiction, a reversal of a normal causal sequence. In a sense the hyena is insisting on holding on to life even in the face of death. Beng find this anomaly dangerous and have invented a ritual of sorts to deal with the perceived danger.¹⁶

If someone happens to see a newly dead hyena, Beng say that he or she must immediately find a dried, stripped corncob, using it to plug up and still the rectum.¹⁷ In the absence of performing this ritually required act, the observer of the trembling rectum will be seized with a fit of laughter that will continue for the rest of his or her life. “Even if your mother dies,” my informant told me, “you won’t stop laughing: you’ll laugh so long and hard that eventually it will kill you.” Where the mythic hyena is mocked by his human audience, the laughter that is directed at the dying hyena rebounds on his human observer. It is as if in death the hyena achieves revenge on his human audience for ridiculing him in his mythic incarnation—a revenge that takes the ironic form of incessant laughter.¹⁸

If laughter, as Bakhtin says (1984:92), represents “the social consciousness of all the people,” then we must inquire: What is the joke? Why is this sight seen as funny to the Beng, and how is it that laughter, if not stopped by ritual, turns lethal?

Laughter is said to be the empirical recognition of anomaly (Douglas 1968; also cf. Apte 1985). Here we start with what is surely an anomalous sight: a body part that refuses to die. I suggest that this anomaly comes to stand for the continual reversal of normal activities for which both the mythical and the actual hyena are noted. The sight thus provokes precisely that behavior in humans that is found detestable in hyenas and is a travesty of daily social relations.

The immorality of laughing continuously through one’s life was stressed by my informant in two ways. First, it was tied to the death of one’s mother.¹⁹ Since the dual descent form of Beng social organization includes corporate matriclans (Gottlieb 1988b), the idea of laughing at the demise of one’s mother is a horrifying negation of the basic affective and jural bonds. The implication seems to be: If one could guffaw at the death of one’s mother, what couldn’t one find funny? The answer, of course, is, Nothing. Thus, such uncontrollable laughter was said by my informant to have only one possible outcome: one’s own death. This situation embodies the ultimate irony: “caught” by his mythical nemesis, the human observer has been in essence transformed, through his mocking of social ties, into that antisocial creature, the hyena.

If the hyena threatens the individual who witnesses his demise, he poses a far greater peril to an entire group of villagers under another set of circumstances. I discovered this perceived threat while talking one day with a male elder who, in telling me the history of his village, explained that the very village in which we were sitting had within living memory been located elsewhere. One day, perhaps about a century ago, a hyena had come in from the forest and defecated on the ground, causing the entire village to be *wi*, “broken”: had not the village been evacuated, he assured me, it would soon have been the locus of innumerable deaths. Thus, the villagers immediately abandoned the old village and chose the present site. To avert just such drastic upheavals, it is said that any hyena seen near a Beng village should be killed and its carcass thrown in the surrounding bush.

Although the elder told the story as a historical event, I am unable to determine its historical accuracy; it may be “just a story” that people tell about their village. But stories such as these, and the issues they reveal, have great import for those who tell and listen to them, who follow the rules the stories lay out (Carrier 1987). In this case we are prompted to ask: Why are the feces of a hyena conceived—and treated—as so dangerous to the village as to require a collective and permanent exodus?²⁰

In this ritually obligatory action, the hyena is construed as the most powerful subverter of human society. Indeed, the subversion here takes the form of symbolic destruction. The hyena is an appropriate vehicle for such a drastic set of meanings because of a constellation of inter-related features perceived as meaningful. This includes the ways that Hyena is perceived in myth as an antisocial character; the anatomy and habits of the living hyena as remarked upon and criticized by the Beng; and the ritual action that Beng have prescribed to deal with the encounter with a newly dead hyena. In other words, several features that are valued negatively in anatomy, myth, and individual ritual combine to make the actual hyena whose droppings pollute the Beng village a potent symbol of the dissolution of that village.²¹

discussion: myth and ritual

In this article I have explored images of the hyena in three domains—anatomy, myth, and ritual—but have not taken any one of these as singly decisive. Neither the Beng vision of hyena anatomy, nor their view of Hyena in myth, nor their treatment of hyenas through ritual action embodies “the true meaning” of the hyena in Beng thought. Rather, all are central components of the Beng view of hyenas and have thus been analyzed as a system. As we have seen, Beng valuations of the hyena in myth and ritual are dramatically opposed, with their conception of the hyena’s anatomy and habits playing a mediating role between these two poles of experience. In the discussion that follows I focus on the relationship between the contrasting domains of myth and ritual, leaving anatomy as the implicit backdrop to these two.

In both classical and some recent anthropological formulations in both Anglophone and Francophone traditions, myth and ritual have been seen overwhelmingly as pieces cut from the same cloth (for example, de Heusch 1985: chs. 6, 7; Dieterlen 1973:49–53; Griaule 1965:194; Malinowski 1948:138–143; Raglan 1958; for a review of this literature, see Okpewho 1983:45–52). Even Lévi-Strauss’ elegiac finale to *The Naked Man* (1981) adheres loosely, if creatively, to this framework. Lévi-Strauss proposes that myth operates as the primary medium of thought, and he relegates ritual to a subsidiary, and dependent, role, embodying nothing more than a “reaction to what thought [i.e., myth] has made of life” (1981:682).²² Still, in reacting to myth, ritual endeavors—though never successfully—to destroy it (1981:675ff; cf. de Heusch 1985:2). Thus, despite the postulated reactive role of ritual, there is a potential tension in Lévi-Strauss’ model that I find appealing. Unlike the position taken by functionalists, it leaves space for a disjunction of meaning between myth and ritual.

The perspective I have taken here owes much to the work of Bakhtin and those recently influenced by him (see Bruner and Gorfain 1984; Handelman 1984; Limón, in press), who have stretched our understanding of verbal forms to include multiple models and heteroglossic encounters.²³ Bakhtin (1981), for example, in writing about heteroglossia in the novel (Holquist 1981:xxi) speaks of language as inherently multivoiced, with speech (*parole*) being *integral* to, not separable from, the linguistic system (*langue*) as such. Those multiple voices exist in juxtaposition, creating a lively (and possibly tension-filled) dialogue throughout any given novel. “The novel,” Bakhtin writes, “is the expression of a Galilean perception of language, one that denies that absolutism of a single and unitary language.” Outside of fiction, multiple voices exist in opposition to the official, “centripetal” language against which they are constantly, and “centrifugally,” pitted and which they often parody (Bakhtin 1981:273).

This view of language and the novel has been applied profitably to culture at large. In this perspective, culture does not display a "single and unitary" view of the world but has multiple voices, much as language and the novel do. As Clifford notes:

dialogical processes proliferate in any complexly represented discursive space (that of an ethnography, or, in his [Bakhtin's] case, a realist novel). Many voices clamor for expression [1986:15].

Such voices can take many forms: male and female, commoner and aristocrat, child and adult, and so on. These voices may be heard singly, but far more complexity can be accommodated if they are heard in pairs or in multiples. This is so because the voices are not mutually redundant; rather, each offers its own distinctive model of reality.

Where Bakhtin chose to focus on multiple levels of experience within single texts, I have found a set of stories that themselves cohere but that stand in contrast to a set of ritual actions that deal with the same set of issues. In the case at hand, myth and ritual may be seen as two kinds of texts or media that, while dealing with the same subject, still exist in mutual contrast. Put another way, I have explored two Beng "voices" that, each in its own way, make statements about the nature of subversion. Both provide, as Hymes has put it, an "imaginative analysis of worlds alternative to the accepted" (1979:xii). In myth, Hyena's foibles are seen by the Beng as a source of degeneracy but they also provoke much amusement, and the storytelling sessions in which these foibles are recounted are as much times of entertainment as education. In his mythical appearances, Hyena acts much as humans do during periods of play, when the ordinary frames of social life are creatively undone, and Hyena, as the protagonist, and humans, as his appreciative audience, are permitted to threaten the social order by ridiculing it (cf. K. Basso 1979; Beidelman 1986:161, 180, 197; Handelman 1977).

While the mythical Hyena permits its Beng audience the luxury of celebrating subversion while at the same time taking heed of it, the actual hyena that a Beng might encounter in the forest or the village represents to the Beng a single-minded and serious perceived danger to the official order. The Beng have constructed a set of potentially dangerous acts of immorality that the hyena can *commit against* humans, and that, in dying, he can *provoke in* humans. As seen in myth and treated through ritual actions, the hyena is an excessive creature. Yet what seems amusing in myth becomes potentially catastrophic in ritual.

Beng ritual may challenge the moral of Hyena myths in taking seriously what the myths propose as entertainment, but it is a mutual challenge: for the myths also challenge the seriousness of the ritual view. I am proposing viewing myth and ritual as related but semi-autonomous means of contemplating a major intellectual and sociological problem. The contrasting views of Hyena in myth and in ritual do not engage directly in dialogical fashion. Rather, they exist on two different—and complementary—planes of experience (cf. Handelman 1977:190 on the complementarity of ritual and play). I do not suggest that one of these presents the "authentic" or definitive understanding while the other offers an obfuscation, as an earlier model might have proposed. Rather, each presents one possible reading, through its own medium.²⁴

Nor am I proposing (contra Dumont 1979) that myth and ritual are hierarchically related to one another. Although it might be tempting to assume that ritual, dealing as it does with behavior, might be intrinsically more significant in people's lives than are myths, which are "just stories" that people tell while sitting around a campfire late at night, I would reject this suggestion. Recent scholarship has demonstrated just how significant "mere stories" may be in people's lives (e.g., Bruner 1986; Rosaldo 1986; Schwartzman 1984).²⁵ This body of work views stories as central means for making sense of the world. To fulfill this promise, the stories need not be the sorts of major cosmological epics that are usually meant when "myths" are spoken of. They can revolve around seemingly more down-to-earth and even banal plots with humble aims: to explain various conundrums and moral dilemmas of daily social life. When seen as imbued with such significance, the Hyena myths, seemingly told for mere amusement, may take their place proudly alongside the more "respectable" form of ritual.

Together, the Beng views of the hyena in myth and in ritual constitute a complex set of commentaries on human society: they provide both a seductive pleasure based in, as well as a warning about, the nature of escape from society. They offer what Bloch (1985:645) in another context has called a "continuing speculation on problems which are irresolvable."

In an earlier work, I addressed this issue in treating the wider themes of "art" and "society" and their interrelations (Gottlieb 1986c). Writing about the role of the dog in Beng culture, I investigated the portrayal of Dog in myth and the role of dogs in human life, including certain rituals performed with or otherwise concerning dogs. I took myths as representative of "art," and daily sociality (in which I included rituals) as representative of "life," and framed the discussion around the theme of the general relationship of art to life. My point was to argue against the functionalist notion that "art" (including myth) passively reflects "life" (including ritual) and to suggest instead that the two reflect and actively create each other.

In this article, I have taken the possibilities further and offered a different model. While Beng myths about Dog may reflect, and in turn be reflected by, rituals and other actions taken by humans in relation to dogs, such is not the case for hyenas. As we have seen, myth and ritual offer dramatically contrasting statements about the nature, value, and effect of hyenas.

I must emphasize that this analysis of myths and rituals that concern hyenas is not presented as a global model to explain the relationship between myths and rituals in general nor even for all Beng culture. Rather, I am suggesting that the relationship between myth and ritual is variable not only cross-culturally but, potentially, intra-culturally as well. Multiple voices can co-exist creatively within a single culture: different modes of relationship between myth and ritual may occur, ranging from the mutually reflective (as with Beng dogs) to the mutually contradictory (as with Beng hyenas). Finally, it is a "heteroglot sense of the world" (Bakhtin 1981:331) that the Beng understanding of hyenas, and of myth and ritual more generally, offers us.

notes

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¹For a use of terms parallel to mine for Africa, see Okpewho (1983); for a compatible discussion of "minor genres" as the locus of serious issues among the Chamula of Mexico, see Gossen (1972:146).

²The Beng, whose language is classified as Southern Mande, are a minority ethnic group living in east-central Côte d'Ivoire, with an estimated population of 10,000 in the prefecture of M'Bahiakro (Côte d'Ivoire 1984). Their indigenous religion is focused on forest spirits that reside at certain spots on named Earths and are worshiped regularly (on Earth worship, which is fairly common in West Africa, see Gottlieb 1986a, 1986d, 1988a). Recently, many Beng have converted to Islam and some to Catholicism. Nevertheless, the traditional religious practices and system of knowledge including those described in this article remain strong even among many of the converts. (For other work on the Beng, see Gottlieb 1986b, 1989a, 1989b).

³This myth was recounted to me by Kouakou ("L'Aji") Kouassi. M. Pascal Kouadio Kouakou and I translated it into French, and I have re-translated it into English.

⁴This myth was recounted to me by M. Koffi (“Kanya”) Kouassi. Mme. Véronique Amlan Akpoueh and I translated it into French, and I have re-translated it into English.

⁵These red and black feathers are considered by the Beng to be very pretty; they are used in making necklaces for children and adults, to bring good luck and wealth. Such necklaces are called *yɔɔ pu baŋ* and are one variety of “animist” jewelry seen as offering magical protection to the wearer.

⁶For the complete text and an analysis of this myth focusing on the role of Dog, see Gottlieb (1986c).

⁷Their recorded speed is up to 65 kilometers (33 miles) per hour (Grzimek 1975:189).

⁸Recounted to me by Koffi (“Kanya”) Kouassi. Véronique Amlan Akpoueh and I translated it into French.

⁹Hyena meat is commonly taboo throughout Africa, but exceptions have been documented, as with the Kujamaat Diola of Senegal (Sapir 1981:531). Among the Beng, most other food taboos are inherited from the father and belong to the patriline. In addition, some people may have individual food taboos diagnosed by a diviner. Apart from hyena meat, the only other meat taboo to all Beng is the vulture—like the hyena, a carrion eater (but see below, Note 16). The only other use that might be made of a hyena carcass would be to sell the skin in town, to whites—who are well outside the moral universe of the Beng and therefore appropriate customers.

¹⁰Recounted to me by Komena Kwame. Véronique Amlan Akpoueh and I translated it into French.

¹¹This recent exodus of the hyenas from the Beng region to the other side of the Mbe River (the western border of Beng territory) is explained in two myths. Consistent with Hyena’s other mythic escapades, both myths blame the move on the immoral behavior of Hyena, specifically in relation to female affines (wife, mother-in-law). In one myth (“Hyena and Hare at Their Mother-in-Law’s Funeral,” recounted by Komena Kwame and translated into French by Véronique Amlan Akpoueh and myself), instead of bringing the proper animals to be sacrificed in honor of his recently deceased mother-in-law, Hyena shows up empty-handed at his mother-in-law’s funeral and is made to feel so ashamed that he runs in humiliation to the other side of the Mbe River. In the other myth (“Rabbit and Hyena Kill Their Wives,”) recounted by Koffi “Kanya” Kouassi and translated into French by Véronique Amlan Akpoueh and myself, Hyena is tricked by Hare into killing his wife and is forced to cross the Mbe River to avoid being beaten by an outraged crowd.

¹²Having, in myth, once lived in the village alongside humans, the spirits left after an argument (Gottlieb 1986d). This myth was recounted to me by M. Kouadio (“Baa”) Akpoueh; the storyteller, his sister Véronique Amlan Akpoueh, and I translated it into French.

¹³On medicinal uses of hyena feces by the Kaguru of Tanzania, compare Beidelman (1986:39 and n. 14).

¹⁴Hyenas’ sound is also problematic. They howl an eerie cry that one scientist has described as *whoo-oof* (Walker 1964:1263). The Beng reproduce one of their sounds as *wrúúúúúúúú*. In shortened form this is also the Beng word for a human ghost (*wru*), which in some circumstances is also said to howl eerily late at night. While I am not claiming an etymological relationship between the two words, the similarity in sound may cause Beng speakers to make an unspoken association between hyenas and human death.

¹⁵Zoologist Alan Schumacher, a hyena specialist at the River Banks Zoo (Columbia, SC), confirmed the likelihood of this described action (personal communication, 15 April 1988). Hyenas scent-mark by conspicuously everting the rectum about an inch, and Schumacher deems it likely that a dying hyena might evert the rectum as a reflex. This action would take place while the animal still technically lay dying and would be terminated before its clinical death, but Schumacher acknowledged that an untrained observer could reasonably conclude that the hyena was already dead.

¹⁶It is a “ritual of sorts” because as we shall see, it does not effect complete transformation in the practitioner (Turner 1967:951, 1985:171) but, rather, prevents a transformation that is threatening to occur (Gottlieb n.d.). Yet if the viewer of the newly dead hyena does not follow this procedure, the transformation he or she undergoes will indeed be permanent.

Beng say that the organ of another animal moves independently after death, and that this is also detestable. When either of the two local kinds of tortoise dies, the Beng say its heart continues to beat. Because of this anatomical anomaly, the tortoise heart is taboo to all. If an individual were to eat it, when it came time to die, one would not really succumb, just as the tortoise never really dies (the beating heart being seen as a vital sign of life)—one would just rot, and no one would know of the “death.” A respectable funeral would be out of the question.

¹⁷Dried corncobs are used for one’s ablutions after defecation and are readily available in the forest. Given this use, they would also be appropriate in the present instance.

¹⁸Schumacher noted (personal communication) that it is quite rare to stumble upon forest animals as they lie dying, and suggested that the observer of a newly dead hyena had probably caused the animal’s demise. In this case, the irony would be more potent: the dead hyena achieves revenge not only for the human’s mocking of his mythical counterpart, but for the hunter’s killing of the actual hyena as well. This scenario awaits confirmation from further field investigation.

¹⁹I should note that the hyena is not the only animal to produce contaminating excretions in the village. If a partridge defecates in the village, it is likewise said that there will be many deaths in the village that year. Thus any partridge seen in the village is immediately killed. However, if a partridge were to excrete in the village, the village would not be “broken” as it is with hyena feces, nor would it be permanently

evacuated.

I should add that other hyena fecal processes figure in the Beng mythological corpus. In one myth the plot revolves around Hyena passing wind. Another myth ("Spirit, Hyena, Cow, and the Division of Labor") features a Spirit putting a finger up Hyena's rectum and hurling him far into the distance. (This myth was told to me by Koffi "Kanya" Kouassi. Véronique Amlan Akpoueh and I translated it into French.) It is clear that the subject of Hyena's anus in all its manifestations—defecating, passing wind, serving as a receptacle for objects other than feces, and apparently trembling after death—are of intense interest to the Beng, who have taken them as symbolic markers of various levels of societal disgust.

²⁰A variation on the conjoined triple theme of hyena, laughter, and mother is found in a Kuranko (Sierra Leone) myth (Jackson 1982:100–101). In this narrative, Hyena punishes all who laugh during a commemorative ceremony for his deceased mother, yet he himself joins in the collective laughter when provoked by a participant in the ceremony. A comparative study of other associations of hyena and laughter might yield interesting results.

²¹There is an interesting contrast with the role of death and the hyena among the Kujamaat Diola. Of the latter, Sapir writes (1981:538): "It is as though Kujamaat thought tolerates the ambiguity of . . . [the] hyena (their decidedly unexemplary positions) during their lives only to void the ambiguity at death," by bringing hyena corpses into the village and giving them a humanlike funeral. By contrast, the Beng amplify the ambiguity of hyenas at their deaths, but this ambiguity is symbolically dangerous and, unless dealt with swiftly by a ritual, ultimately proves fatal in a bizarre manner.

The Beng emphasis on the link between hyenas and mortality emerges in a linguistic connection. As we have seen, by excreting in human territory, a hyena is said to destroy the village. The verb used by my informant in describing this to me was *wi* (lit., "to break"). Significantly, this same verb was used by Beng in describing the military depredations that the Guinean Muslim warrior, Samori, perpetrated on some nearby villages and towns at the end of the 19th century, in an effort to create an Islamic empire (France 1895a, 1895b; Person 1968–75). So the locution describing the forced abandonment of a Beng village because of the presence of hyena feces resonates with military history. In both cases, the destroyer is in reality, or is often depicted mythically as a Muslim threatening the integrity of Beng religion.

The question of why the Beng should negatively value hyenas, and the subversion they symbolize, must be put off for another forum, but I note only briefly a tentative solution by way of comparison. The Bamana of Mali, whose language is distantly related to Beng, revere hyenas as sacred, using their representations in the masculine *koré* initiation ritual as symbols of wisdom. It may be that for the Bamana the hyena's subversiveness is respected, in keeping with the general respect accorded by the Bamana to heroic humans, who are themselves in some ways quite subversive (Bird and Kendall 1980). In contrast, the Beng have no developed role for the hero and thus, perhaps, no serious place for subversion. Charles Bird, Martha Kendall, and I hope to pursue this comparative analysis further.

²²For another critique of this position, see E. Basso (1985:309–311).

²³This work has clear parallels in contemporary literary criticism. For a useful summary and introduction to this body of work, see Culler (1982).

²⁴In other societies one may find an alternate view of the society kept at the *implicit* level: in such systems, as da Matta (1984) proposes, what is *not* stated in cultural forms may be as significant as what *is* stated, the two (of which one half may be silent) revealing the total range of social values. The Beng system, by contrast, makes two alternative, even competing views explicit, through the two alternate "readings" in myth and ritual.

²⁵This work is part of a broader perspective that focuses on the power of language—for example, see Ahern (1979), Crapanzano (1980:79).

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