

Revising the Text, Revisioning the Field: Reciprocity over the Long Term

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SUMMARY In *Parallel Worlds* (Gottlieb and Graham 1994), we chronicle our first two stays in Beng villages in Côte d'Ivoire. The present essay updates the aftermath of *Parallel Worlds* on the Beng community and, especially, our relationship with that community. Returning to Bengland in summer 1993, we aimed to offer royalties from the sale of our memoir to two Beng villages, to be used for community development projects of their choosing. Would the residents of these villages agree on small-scale projects, or would various subgroups diverge, perhaps bitterly, in their opinions? What role, if any, should we play in trying to steer a project toward our own values concerning democracy and appropriate development? While rooted in our experiences, this essay also serves as a prolegomenon to a more general meditation on the obligations that devolve on the ethnographer of a place, any place, over the long term, and it further reflects on the parallels between the continual processes and demands of revising a text and of revisioning our relations—ethical, literary, and otherwise—with the communities that (willingly or not) host us.

Alma

In writing *Parallel Worlds* (Gottlieb and Graham 1994), fiction writer Philip Graham and I teamed up to chronicle our first two stays in Beng villages in the West African nation of Côte d'Ivoire in 1979–80 and 1985. We spent a long time honing that text; collaborating with a *real* Writer (with a capital "w"), I for one learned much about the writing process that I had previously only glimpsed secondhand. Whatever our literary goals and efforts, when Philip and I brought a newly printed copy of *Parallel Worlds* to the field with us in 1993, the reaction of our Beng friends, kin, and neighbors to the text itself could not have been more indifferent. The experience was disarmingly humbling: all those words, all that effort agonizing over them—their choice, their rhythm, their poetry, and the words themselves—proved utterly irrelevant to their subjects. The reason, of course, has to do with the political economy of education: like most rural residents on the African continent, a majority of Beng villagers are not literate. Moreover, in the officially francophone nation of Côte d'Ivoire, a former French colony, those villagers who are literate are the product of a school system in which all classroom learning is conducted in French. Given this linguistic-colonial legacy, our book, written as it is in English, was inaccessible to virtually the entire Beng

community—not only those who were not literate but even those who were—who were understandably frustrated and annoyed at their inability to read its pages.

Of course we anticipated this inevitable gap between text and subject, but the emotional effect of the text's impenetrability on both us and the Beng was not so predictable. Nor was the reaction of many villagers to two other entirely nontextual aspects of the book. First, instead of engaging with the text, many Beng villagers reacted strongly to its cover. Most who inspected the book approved of the image we had chosen—a photo of a young diviner dancing while possessed by spirits—though some diviners complained half teasingly that *their* pictures had not been featured. A second nontextual aspect of the book occupied far more discussion: many villagers questioned us actively about the money the volume had earned us thus far. This line of inquiry was easy to encourage, for deciding how to distribute the profits realized by the book's publication was one of the issues that Philip and I had gone to Bengland that summer to address.¹

During our previous stays among the Beng, Philip and I had tried to repay the hospitality and generosity of our hosts and hostesses in ways that we had judged feasible and that they found appropriate. People's medical needs and demands turned out to be the most compelling arena for our efforts. Indeed, these were so great that we always ended up spending a large proportion of my grant funds on such supplies as bandages, antibiotic creams and washes, malaria medicine, aspirins, and vitamins and by offering basic nursing services daily (Gottlieb and Graham 1994).² This assistance was regularly sought and well appreciated, but we were painfully aware that we could help only some individuals and not others—and certainly not the village as a whole.³ Moreover, our efforts while doing fieldwork, however well meant, were of the most transitory sort—quasi-ritualized encounters "for the nonce," as Barbara Myerhoff might have said (1992:131–133). Soon after we left the villages, whatever medical supplies we left behind would surely run out, and rural Beng would have as little access to Western biomedical care as when we first arrived.

Many scholars now say that the time for such temporary reciprocity is gone, and a far more active, even lifelong commitment to our field communities is morally required.⁴ Our willingness to engage with the ethical implications of our fieldwork is undoubtedly part of a broader tendency to interrogate critically the ethical implications of virtually every aspect of the discipline, from fieldwork, to writing, to conceptualizing our analytical models, to teaching (see Clifford and Marcus 1986; Fox 1991; Gupta and Ferguson 1997b; Marcus and Fischer 1986; Rosaldo 1989—to cite several important recent texts among many others; for an early set of ahead-of-their-time essays, see Hymes 1972). Partly this move has to do with the acknowledgment that many of us continue to return to the field over a long span of our own lifetimes. Of course, returning to the field itself is hardly a new practice—Margaret Mead engaged in the revisit/restudy genre and chronicled it reflectively far earlier in the century (1956)—but contemporary fieldworkers continue to update the practice with increasingly thoughtful assessments of the twin processes of memory and experience involved in revisiting earlier field sites (e.g., Bruner 1999; Foster 1979; Gudeman and Rivera 1995; Keesing 1985). Ironically, as Edward Bruner has pointed out (personal communication, January 2, 1999), our increasing acknowledgment of continuing obligation to our host communities comes at the same time that many in our discipline are pushing the conceptual limits of the very notion of an appropriate field site or community, expanding its classic locus in non-Western villages to factories, urban elites, ethnographers' native communities, novels, science and the scientific laboratory, the Internet, the telephone, the theater, transnational sites, multiple sites, and so

on (e.g., D'Alisera 1997; D'Amico-Samuels 1991; Gupta and Ferguson 1997a; Handler and Segal 1990; Harrison 1995; Kelleher in press; Kondo 1997; Marcus 1998; Martin 1994; Narayan 1993; Ong 1987; Rabinow 1996; Robbins and Bamford 1997; Traweek 1988). The long-term ethical demands of these new ethnographic practices and places have yet to be systematically charted.

While the classic field site is thus being reconstructed in daring and imaginative ways, some of us continue to pursue more traditional-style fieldwork in rural communities in the non-Western world. In my own case, as an ethnographer who built a career on the basis of such fieldwork, for years I felt a lifelong debt that I thought could never be fully repaid but that needed to be repaid, at least partially. Perhaps my sense of professional obligation is similar to the way that lineages view the business of affinal debts in some non-Western communities. In certain African societies, bridewealth payments are seen as constituting a long-term obligation that is sometimes completed only after a number of years: in some cases, the last payment may be made only after children are born to the couple or even when one of the spouses dies (in the latter case, ironically completing the contracting of the marriage only at the very moment that it is dissolved) (e.g., Deluz 1987:116–117; Goody 1973:12; Nagashima 1987:184–193; Vellenga 1983:145). Outside Africa, a marriage itself may be seen as the locus of long-term debts that are never repaid—instead, marriage may incur a permanent system of lineage-level debts or counter-debts by means of various marital regimes of direct and indirect or symmetrical and asymmetrical reciprocity (e.g., Leach 1954; Lévi-Strauss 1969). One variation on this theme is particularly relevant: with the system of matrilineal cross-cousin marriage, a given lineage remains in a permanent status of “wife taker” to another “wife-giver” lineage from whom it perpetually receives wives and toward which it thus remains in a permanent state of debt. Like all these systems of exchange, our “marriage” to the Beng occasions a continuing commitment—and as with matrilineal cross-cousin marriage systems in particular, ours is in many ways an asymmetrical obligation, with the bulk of debt clearly on our side. Accordingly, early on in our fieldwork, Philip and I vowed that if we were ever in a position to offer ongoing support to the impoverished Beng community, we would. Our desire also stemmed from the fact that by the end of our first stay, having become enmeshed in kinship ties that began as fictive but soon felt real enough, we had become poignantly aware of the Beng value that, in families, everything—not only bounty and good fortune but even illness and misfortune—should be shared.

A modest opportunity came in 1993, when we returned to Côte d'Ivoire immediately after publishing *Parallel Worlds*. After negotiating our book contract, we had decided to split the book's after-tax royalties equally with the two Beng villages in which we had previously lived, Kosangbe and Asagbe. Having arrived in Abidjan in May 1993, we were delighted to learn through the U.S. embassy of a new matching grant program that was meant to support small-scale, locally appropriate village projects. If we could submit an application for a project that was acceptable by the guidelines of the program, the embassy would match our funds, thereby increasing dramatically the possibilities for village projects that we could offer the Beng.

But would the residents of the two Beng villages be able to agree on a small-scale development project—or would various subgroups disagree, perhaps bitterly, about our proposal? Would one group monopolize the decision-making process to its own advantage? If it seemed that this was in danger of occurring, should we claim titular rights to the profits realized by *Parallel Worlds* and try to guide the villagers toward a project that reflected our own values concerning democracy, gender equality, and ecologically appropriate

development—or would this be too interventionist, our own form of neocolonialism? Influenced by Walter Rodney (1974) and other critics of Western colonialism and postcolonial “development” efforts, I had often presented my students with lectures on “how Europe had underdeveloped Africa.” But in enacting a modest development project ourselves, would it really be so easy to avoid mistakes of our own?⁵

Soon we relocated to Bengland, taking up a place in the compound of our old friend Amenan, who was still living in her natal village of Asagbe. We let the village elders know that we had brought means to support modest development projects for both Asagbe and Kosangbe. We hoped to call a public meeting in Asagbe. But Germain—the representative of the nation’s official government party, the Parti Démocratique de Côte d’Ivoire (PDCI)—decided instead to spread the news of our offer throughout the village and then report back to us periodically on the evolving public opinion. No doubt Germain enjoyed this opportunity to boost his prestige by serving as mediator between us and the village and thus in effect as political midwife to what he hoped would become a significant enterprise. Over the next few weeks, then, Germain proposed for our consideration a series of possible projects that he said grew out of his conversations with other villagers.

The first option Germain reported was the construction of a building to serve as the headquarters for the PDCI in the village. But we knew that this strictly political undertaking would not be eligible for the U.S. embassy’s matching grant (whose stipulations we had already studied carefully), so we politely asked for a second choice on the part of the villagers.

“You could help construct houses for our village’s elementary school teachers,” Germain replied. “The teachers have to rent out houses from the villagers, and this arrangement isn’t good for them. The government is planning to build houses for the teachers in two years, but if you fund this project, it would be done sooner.”

We suspected that this proposition would also fall outside the guidelines of the U.S. embassy because the Ivoirian government itself was planning to undertake the project. Besides, the teachers seemed to be living well indeed, at least compared with the villagers. We did not see why our scarce funds should support middle-class outsiders rather than impoverished Beng farmers.

“What about a mill?” we suggested, adding, “When we were in Abidjan, officials at the U.S. embassy said that they’ve introduced mills in several other villages around the country, and the machines seem to be working quite well. They hull coffee and rice, and they also grind peanuts and corn.”

“Let me propose it and see what others say,” Germain agreed. A few days later, he returned to report that there did not seem to be much support for the mill.

“But people would get a better price when they sell their coffee and rice,” I said. “And it would really help the women, since they’re the ones who do the work grinding corn and peanuts.” Fearing a male monopoly on the discussion, I decided to ask Germain bluntly, “Have you given the women a chance to voice their opinions?”

“They’re the ones who are opposing the mill,” Germain answered quietly. “It’s complicated,” he added, appearing embarrassed. My friend Amenan, who had been listening, explained that some village women were reluctant to accept a mill because they were afraid of sorcery-based sabotage, rooted in a recent incident in the village. A short while ago, it seemed, an old Beng woman had taken some manioc to an immigrant living in the village, a man who owned a small manioc-grinding mill. The old woman was outraged by what she considered an exorbitant milling fee and walked away in a huff. As soon as she left, Amenan added

dramatically, the machine broke down! Everyone in the village had agreed that the old woman had used witchcraft to break the machine. With this sad story weighing heavily in current memory, some women were nervous about introducing another mill into the village.

Germain suggested a new plan for our funds: we could buy a powerful, outdoor amplifier system. This would be used for large, villagewide meetings, Germain explained—when, for example, government officials from the cities came to conduct meetings in the village. This way, everyone in the village could hear the proceedings.

Once again, we doubted that the U.S. embassy would support yet another of Germain's politically motivated schemes. Reluctantly, Germain agreed to canvas public opinion on the mill once again. Soon he reported back to us the unwelcome news that the mill was now becoming the focus of a dispute between the teachers and the villagers. Ironically, the teachers were supporting the mill project, while some villagers still preferred the project of constructing houses for the teachers. Perhaps these villagers reasoned that if we supported housing for the teachers and witchcraft were to follow, that would be the teachers' problem and no concern of theirs.

How could we broach this impasse and "do good" for the Beng community when it was seeming increasingly doubtful that there even was "a Beng community"? Perhaps, I wondered bitterly, there were just congeries of disputatious individuals who called themselves "Beng." At the time, Philip was revising the manuscript of his novel, *How to Read an Unwritten Language* (Graham 1995)—a title that unfortunately seemed to resonate all too well with the mysterious changeability of our Asagbe neighbors.

Soon Germain returned once again: the skeptical villagers had unexpectedly changed their minds and decided on the mill after all. Relieved, though still a little sad, I thought back to my friend Amenan's childbirth, which I had both partly witnessed and partly missed back in 1980. Was I destined to be only half present when important events occurred? Still, Philip and I were delighted that the villagers had finally agreed on a project that we ourselves approved of, for we thought it might actually alleviate in modest ways their grinding poverty. We turned our attention to Kosangbe, eager to finalize this second project before the villagers of Asagbe voiced further doubts about *their* decision.

Philip

If Alma and I had any foolish illusions that we had managed to capture the fluid Beng world between the covers of a book, our return to Bengland in the summer of 1993 soon evaporated such notions. Clearly, the last page of our memoir was not our last page with the Beng—though after years of writing and revising, writing and revising, I think that in some ways our village friends and neighbors had quietly, slowly, become characters to me, actors in a parallel literary world.

As Alma and I sat in a gathering with the elders of Kosangbe under the village kapok tree to discuss the distribution of book royalties, it was clear we would never be able to pin these people to the pages of a book. We had worked so hard to make them come alive on the page, and here they were, our Beng friends, the "characters" of *Parallel Worlds*, effortlessly themselves before us, teasing and debating each other far more vibrantly than we would ever be able to portray.

After all our writing, how little we still knew them. I had predicted that the book royalty negotiations would run smoothly in Asagbe (how wrong I had been!) and feared that the always contentious Kosangbe villagers would be our

greatest challenge. Yet here were our former crusty neighbors, once so easily divided from each other, now just as easily civil and surprisingly united in their judgments. The normally cunning and often dictatorial chief, San Yao, now searched earnestly for consensus, and the usually sharp-tongued Ché Kofi guided the discussion gently yet eloquently. Clearly, these two men had changed, matured in the years since we had first met them. Or had Alma and I merely underestimated these aspects of their personalities, not given them enough weight in our portrayals? Oh, the curse of a writer, endlessly revising. . . .

What all the elders finally agreed on was this: long-overdue repairs to the village water pump. Currently the women of Kosangbe had to work overtime with their old and deeply inefficient pump, an exhausting, daily chore with seemingly no end in sight, for no one was expecting the government, after so many years of neglect, to help them any time soon. I sat back on my chair beneath the kapok tree, pleased that the male elders had placed the interests of the women of the village first on their list. It was a surprise as well, considering what I had long considered to be Beng men's indifference to the terribly burdensome workloads of the women, from the daily gathering of wood and water to the constant triple demands of farming, cooking, and child care.

Alma and I felt certain that water pump repairs could be funded by the American embassy, so we agreed on the spot, with confidence, to the elders' choice. Within a week, Yapi Kouadio, a Beng mechanic who could fix almost anything, traveled by bush taxi to the city of Bouaké and haggled with Julia traders there over prices for materials and spare parts. He also suggested a way to adapt the well so that a woman would get twice as much water for half the usual effort, by converting from a hand pump to a foot-pedaled pump. Even with this addition to the project, when we tallied up all the necessary expenses for parts along with the cost of labor, we still had a substantial amount of money left for the villagers' use. So we initiated yet another round of discussions, engaging Yacouba, our dearest friend in the village, as a trusted middleman.

After a few days, a delegation from Kosangbe, headed by Yacouba, came to visit us in Asagbe with the villagers' decision. This was the moment when Alma and I shifted from what had been until then a perhaps too-convenient fit with Beng villagers' needs and our own Western assumptions of value and, once again, realized that no matter how carefully we had written our friends into a book, they were still capable of surprising us.

"Our village needs chairs," Yacouba announced. But not the traditional wooden stools or chairs of the sort made by Ghanaian carpenters. Instead, the Kosangbe villagers wanted flashier chairs in the current popular Ivoirian style, made in a very busy factory in Abidjan—comfortable chairs with brightly colored molded plastic seats attached to sturdy metal frames.

Alma and I knew them well. In Asagbe they were brought out on ritual occasions for the visiting elders to sit on. To our eyes, they looked garish—such bright yellows, greens, blues, and reds! But they were indeed comfortable—those molded plastic seats really did the trick, and this was a not inconsiderable plus for elders who had to sit through hours of funeral orations or marriage-thanking speeches. The fact that the chairs were expensive added to their prestige. Asagbe villagers had bought theirs through contributions raised by every compound—in a sense, the entire village owned those chairs, which had become a demonstration of village pride and respect for visitors.

Kosangbe, a village that was the ritual center of Bengland, was nevertheless a small one and poor as well, even by local standards. The villagers had tried more than once to raise enough funds for such fancy chairs but had been unable to do so. Yet, more often than most Beng villages, Kosangbe hosted many events in the



Figure 1

Fifty blue plastic chairs being stacked up in the public plaza of Kosangbe, Côte d'Ivoire, upon presentation to the village. Photo by Alma Gottlieb.

ritual calendar. Each event brought with it a moment of shame, when no modern, welcoming chairs could be offered to honored guests. In Yacouba's words, Kosangbe's "name was broken" before all the other Beng.

So we agreed to buy 50 chairs for Kosangbe (Figure 1). Alma and I took a trip to the factory in Abidjan and negotiated a price. We also could not resist a little aesthetic meddling and picked out the most muted color available—dark blue. Then we arranged for delivery, understanding that we were ensuring the arrival of much more than furniture: these chairs represented to the people of Kosangbe the rescue of their village's good name.

Still we had royalty money left over. So Kosangbe went through a third round of discussions. This time the request that Yacouba announced to us in Amenan's courtyard was even more surprising: "The elders would like a stereo system for the young people of the village."

"A stereo system?" I replied, beginning to feel less like a grateful guest of Bengland and a bit more like Santa Claus. Yet there must be a story behind this unexpected request. I leaned forward with great interest as Alma and I waited for our friend to provide it.

"The youths don't have anything to do in the village in the evening," Yacouba explained, "or anywhere to go to amuse themselves. Farming is so hard. Why *shouldn't* they move to M'Bahiakro or Bouaké?" Indeed, Kosangbe had lost more than 10 percent of its population in recent years—nearly all of the loss being young men and women leaving for the larger towns and cities. It had even become difficult to persuade a family from another village to offer a daughter in marriage to a Kosangbe man, for such a young woman would have to move to a tiny, backward place—even if it was the most powerful of all Beng villages, ritually speaking.

But Kosangbe's reputation would soon be on the rise, Yacouba declared, now that a refurbished well and beautiful blue chairs for the most respected guests



Figure 2

Alma Gottlieb and son Nathaniel Gottlieb-Graham with villagers of Kosangbe during the presentation of stereo equipment. Photo by Philip Graham.

were on the way. A weekly dance party, the elders reasoned, would not only give the Kosangbe youth another reason to remain in their natal village, it would make marriage negotiations with other villages far easier. Kosangbe already had a gasoline-powered generator that could be adapted to run a stereo system, and, Yacouba added, some of the young men had already worked up a list of the favored components to buy; they were particularly hopeful that the tape deck might be a Sony.

By now our continuing experiences in Bengland had begun to revise *us*, two authors who at least unconsciously felt we had earned a dollop of authority about the Beng. But what had we learned except that we would always learn? So Alma and I found ourselves once again back in Abidjan, this time in the ironical pursuit of a good deal on expensive Japanese electronic technology, all in the service of helping shore up the shaky demographics of the most traditional Beng village.

On the day we brought the stereo system back to Kosangbe (see Figure 2) everyone danced, from the youngest child to old San Yao, the frail chief of the village. When the elders stopped the music briefly to bless us ritually, Alma and I felt a bit closer to that elusive acceptance we had always craved, and we felt that we had somehow come full circle: by distributing the proceeds of our book about Beng culture, we had not only adopted Beng notions of obligation and generosity, we had further entered into the culture's logic, discovering value not only in typical development projects easily approved by American embassy officials but also in projects that offered benefits that might be hidden to an outsider's eyes but whose effects were no less tangible.

Parallel Worlds, written in the hopes of bridging the gulf between two cultures, had, through its royalties, brought *us* the gift of discovering how easy it was for our book about fieldwork to be revised in the face of the ongoing fieldwork experience. As a fiction writer, revision has always been for me a professional obligation and a personal passion; yet, slow learner that I am, it had taken me a

very long time to understand that fieldwork itself is a form of revision, version after version of one's faltering understanding being "written" and then altered in the face of new insights. *Parallel Worlds*, I realized, was only an early draft in a continuing journey of experience and imagination.

Notes

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For believing in (the idea that became) *Parallel Worlds*, we remain grateful to Philip Graham's literary agent, Geri Thoma; to our editors at Crown/Random House, Wilson Henley and Erica Marcus; and to our editors at the University of Chicago Press, Maggie Hivnor and David Brent.

For inspiring him to take seriously the moral responsibilities of a writer, Philip Graham is forever in the debt of Grace Paley.

It goes without saying that our ongoing responsibility to the people of Bengland remains far outside the scope of these acknowledgments. Beyond the projects detailed in this article, we continue to send proceeds from *Parallel Worlds* to individual Beng villagers, all the while realizing the insufficiency of these efforts when compared with the gift of observations and reflections offered to us over the years by many Beng.

1. For an account of our stay in Bengland during the summer of 1993 with a focus on the experience of bringing along our then-six-year-old son, see Gottlieb et al. 1998. For an article resulting from the research that Alma conducted on infancy during the same period, see Gottlieb 1998.

2. The nearest dispensary to Bengland with minimally acceptable supplies and services is in the town of M'Bahiakro—a mere 25 miles or so away by road but a world away in both culture and economy. As elsewhere in the non-Western world, because of the prohibitive costs involved in rural transportation and in buying whatever medicines a doctor may prescribe, sick people in Beng villages rarely travel to town to visit the dispensary; when they do, tragically, it is often too late. Recently, a dispensary was constructed in one of the Beng villages, but by all accounts it does not have much to offer. At best, a single nurse constitutes the staff; thus, only very low level services and medicines are ever available. During our last stay in Bengland in summer 1993, this dispensary was closed entirely for the full three months.

3. Since our last stay in Bengland, we have used the profits from *Parallel Worlds* States-side to support the first Beng student to study in the United States. In January 1994, Bertin Kouadio, the eldest son of our host in the Beng village of Kosangbe, came to Urbana, Ill., where he has recently completed his B.A. in political science at the University of Illinois, supported in part by funds from the sale of *Parallel Worlds*. As of this writing, he is pursuing his M.A. in African studies at the same university. He plans to return to Côte d'Ivoire where he hopes to use his Western education to further the interests and development of his people. Time will tell whether this seemingly individualized investment will repay the Beng community at large as directly as other, more obviously community-oriented projects might do.

4. Recently, *Anthropology Today* called for an ongoing conversation of sorts to be aired in the pages of that journal on the issue of continuing engagement with and commitment to one's field community (Benthall et al. 1997). To date, several short pieces have been published responding to the call (de Waal 1998; Hardiman 1998; Killworth 1998; Rudge 1998). Undoubtedly, further localized discussions of both short- and long-term reciprocity

in the field will begin to be written as we continue to engage the ethical imperatives we have been discussing at a theoretical level in the discipline for some years.

5. For more recent critical anthropological discussions of the development literature in Africa, see, for example, Ferguson 1990 and Peters 1996.

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