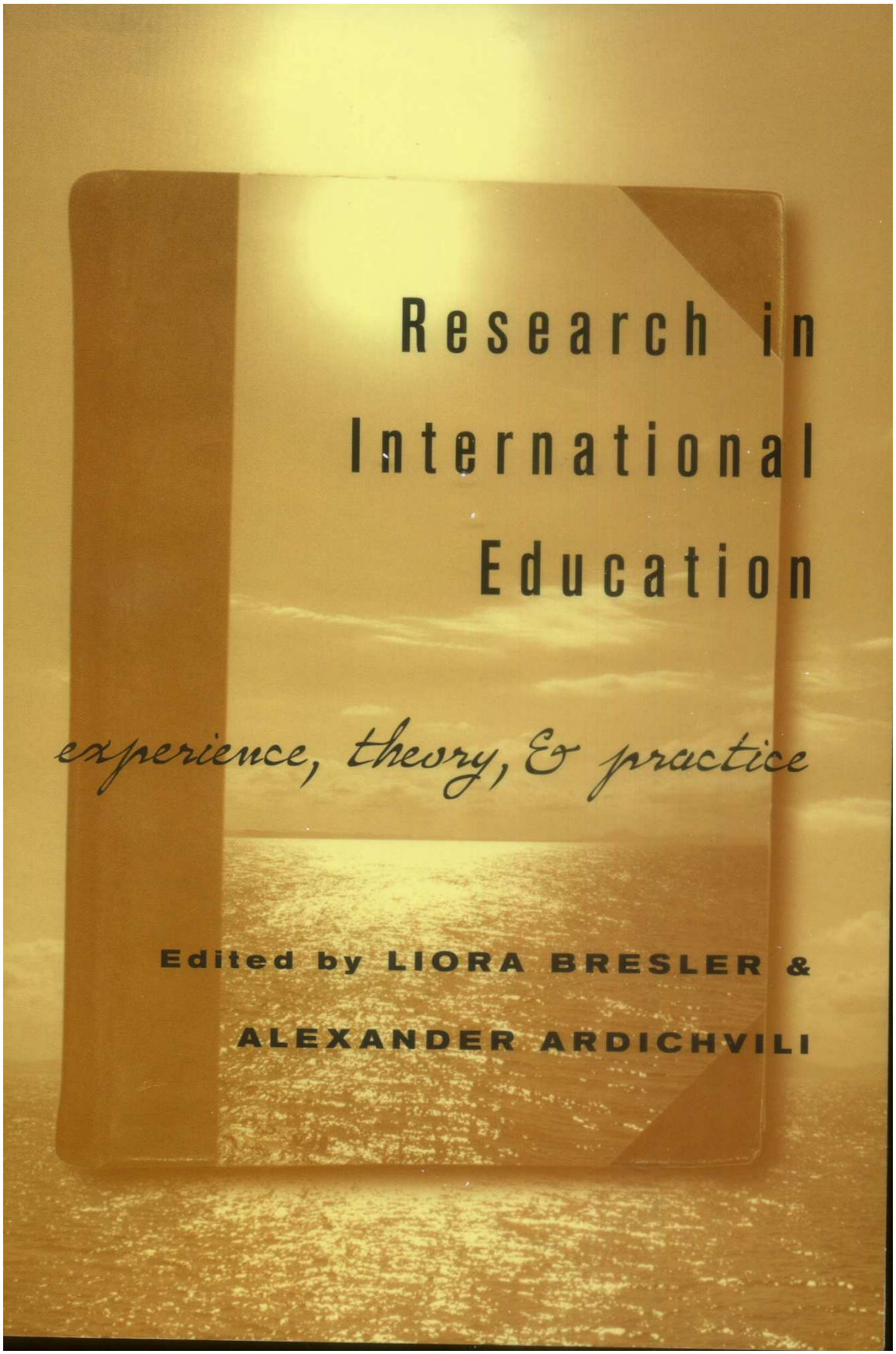
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Deconstructing the Notion of Education: A View from West Africa

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> [S]chooling is only one small part of how a culture inducts the young into its canonical ways. Indeed, schooling may even be at odds with a culture's other ways of inducting the young into the requirements of communal living.
>
> —Jerome Bruner (1996, p. ix)

In recent years, western scholars of education have been exploring in multiply-fruitful ways the cultural foundations to educational structures and values. A welcome burst of research and writing on the means by which culture shapes particular pedagogical decisions and settings now marks much of the study of schools and schooling. A combination of theoretical analysis, comparative research on schooling cross-culturally, and extended ethnographic fieldwork in North American and European schools has enriched our understanding of education immeasurably.[1]

In this chapter, I aim to build on these many productive approaches to education by destabilizing the idea of education itself, stepping back to ask what might be the ultimate anthropological question on the topic: Is the concept of education, as generally understood by most graduates of western-style schools, universally

applicable? In scholarly writings and popular conceptions alike (and notwithstanding the sometimes problematic interference of a presumed "temperament"), I suggest that the notion of education is often premised on the image of a child emerging from the womb as something close to a *tabula rasa* (Bruner, 1996, p. 56). Many western models for the optimal education of young children are built on a model of child development that implies an uncomprehending and somewhat mute newborn first arriving in the world from a restricted uterine space that provided, at best, minimal stimulation and social interaction. Before that, the underlying biological model implies, the fetus was a mere zygote of a few cells with no existence whatsoever before those cells were joined.

Given this model, the western caretaker of an infant is, in turn, authorized to treat the young tot as something of a blank slate. Thus, the primary responsibility of parents, teachers, and other adults is frequently posited in western(ized) nations as the moral obligation to intervene pedagogically in young children's lives starting from the earliest stages of life *ex utero*—or even before—to educate an essentially unknown, and un-knowing, newborn.[2]

Indeed, in the current era, increasing numbers of middle- and upper-class Euro-Americans are investing more and more time educating their children from the first days out of the crib, and even *in utero*, on the presumption that their babies arrive in this life with vast unshaped reservoirs of open possibility that must be actively cultivated with great care. The contemporary industries catering to parents who subscribe to this model are fast becoming the stuff of parody. Babies turning into musical geniuses after listening to tapes of Mozart are now standard goals in many middle-class circles. Baby showers are accordingly replete with the requisite artifacts thought necessary to produce future prodigies.

In this chapter, I suggest that the understanding of the goals of early education that underlie such parenting strategies is underwritten profoundly, if sometimes invisibly, by specific cultural scripts that are far more—or less—relevant in some cultural spaces than others. I make this point by means of an ethnographic case study from a corner of rural West Africa. Here, I suggest, the common western understanding of education described above would be at odds with local concepts of the young child and of

the corresponding conception of adults' responsibility toward that child. Drawing on ethnographic research among the Beng people of Côte d'Ivoire, I begin with the Beng concept of the afterlife.[3] This is, perhaps, an unlikely and unexpected starting point for a discussion of education. However, for reasons I hope to demonstrate, it makes eminent sense as a departure point in the Beng context. After analyzing how the Beng ideology of reincarnation informs day-to-day decisions caretakers make in relation to young children, I conclude by calling for educators to pay greater attention to indigenous models of education that may or may not synchronize with local conceptions.

The Hidden Knowledge of Beng Babies

In Côte d'Ivoire (or Ivory Coast), the views of most rural Beng villagers concerning fetal development are quite different from the views common in many western settings as I have glossed them above. Accordingly, Beng adults maintain that infants lead lives that are shaped profoundly—if, for adults, obscurely—by cognitive and emotional processes alike. Indeed, infants are seen as living lives defined by spirituality, desire, knowledge, and memory. In fact, the younger they are, the more thoroughly this is said to be the case. To understand the indigenous conception of infants' inner lives, we must investigate the local model of life *before* the womb.

In Beng villages, each baby is said to be a reincarnation of someone who died. By itself, this ideology is by no means rare in Africa.[4] It is also well documented for South Asia and Native North America (see Mills & Slobodin, 1994). Below, I investigate the implications of this common ideology for the treatment of Beng infants and their experiences.[5] Through this case study, I hope to introduce an indigenous conception of the nature and task of education that is quite different from the one that most western-trained educators bring to the discipline.

The Afterlife Is Where We Come From[6]

In the Beng world, infants emerge not from a land of regressively diminishing life, but from a place known as *wrugbe* ("spirit village [or town]"), which we might translate loosely as the "af-

terlife." Once a person's body dies, the soul (*neneN*) transforms to a spirit (*wru*) and travels to the afterlife. *Wrugbe* is seen as dispersed among invisible neighborhoods in major cities in Africa and Europe. Eventually each *wru* is reincarnated back into this life.

My comprehension of *wrugbe* has been gained through a series of conversations over the years with many Beng people, especially religious specialists. During my last visit, the diviner Kouakou Ba shared with me his exceptional knowledge of Beng religious practice. Here is how he explained his understanding of *wrugbe*:

> Every day, there are deaths and births. The number of people living here and in wrugbe keeps going up and down. You know who you're replacing from wrugbe if someone dies on the same day that you're born. Otherwise, if no one dies on the day you're born, you don't know who you're replacing. (K. Ba, personal communication, 1996)

Two issues that warrant discussion emerge from Kouakou Ba's statement. First is personal identity: In the Beng model, *everyone* is considered a reincarnation of an ancestor, although only some know whose prior identity they embody. Second are economic implications: In the indigenous conception of demography, each human life given (from *wrugbe*) must be counterbalanced by one taken (back to *wrugbe*), creating in effect a zero-sum conception of human life. This ideology of reincarnation-as-demographic-balance operates effectively at the ideological level regardless of actual demographic fluctuations.[7]

This potential lack of "fit" between ideology and praxis, as we might put it, is mirrored at another level. Once someone dies, the *neneN* or soul is transformed into a *wru* or spirit. However, when that person is reincarnated into someone else, the *wru* nevertheless continues to exist as an ancestor. There is, we might say, a double existence rather than an either/or conception. Unlike the classical Aristotelian framework, which demands that an identity be either one thing or another but not both simultaneously, in the Beng view one may simultaneously exist at two very different levels of reality, one visible and earthly, the other invisible and ghostly.[8]

The boundary between *wrugbe* and this life is permeable in another way. Although *wrugbe* is located in distant places where the residents' lifestyle is quite different from that of rural Beng villag-

ers, Beng adults do not perceive *wrugbe* as unreachable. I was told of several living adults who had managed to travel invisibly to *wrugbe* (in their dreams) in order to converse with ancestors.

Moreover, until recently the *wrus* of Beng ancestors themselves were said to traverse back and forth daily between *wrugbe* and this life. Before local officials of the Ivoirian government ordered thatch-roofed houses to be destroyed in the late 1960s, the Beng lived in large, round dwellings accommodating both an extended family and their ancestors (Gottlieb, 1996, pp. 135–136). Every night, someone put out a small bowl of food for the family's ancestors. At night, the last person to retire closed the door, locking in the living and the dead to co-sleep. In the morning, the first person to open the door released the *wrus*, who traveled back to *wrugbe* for the day—returning at night for their dinner and sleeping spot once again.

With such regular traffic between this life and *wrugbe*, from which infants have just emerged, what are the implications for babies' caretakers?

The Umbilical Cord: Lifeline to Wrugbe

Until the umbilical cord stump falls off, the newborn is not considered to have left *wrugbe* at all, and the tiny creature is not classified as a person (*sòN*). If a newborn dies during those first few days, no funeral is held nor is the event announced publicly. The infant's passing is not conceived as a death but a return in bodily form to the space that the child was still fully inhabiting cognitively, emotionally, and spiritually.

Beng women told me that the umbilical stump usually drops off on the third or fourth day, as was the case for the Beng newborns I have observed. Women apply to a newborn's umbilical stump an herbal mixture that they say shortens the number of days the cord remains attached to the navel by accelerating the drying of the moist cord fragment.[9] The day the stump falls off is momentous: The newborn has begun to emerge from *wrugbe*.

To mark and inaugurate the beginning of this passage, the infant's mother and some kinswomen conduct two or three bodily rituals of transformation on the tiny new person.[10] First, they ritually administer an enema to the baby. From the next day forward,

the mother will administer such an enema twice a day to her baby (morning and night); an older child often takes regular enemas as well, and many adults also give themselves enemas on a regular basis. Thus, the baby is starting to be "toilet trained" from the first week of life, beginning a series of "civilizing" processes inaugurating the baby's entry into "this life" (Gottlieb, forthcoming, Chapter 5).

A few hours after the first enema, the newborn undergoes a second ritual. The maternal grandmother (or another older woman) ritually attaches a necklace she has made from a savanna grass. Now, additional necklaces and other items of jewelry, which Beng babies sport in abundance for both medicinal and aesthetic reasons, can be applied.[11] In the case of a girl, a third ritual manipulation of the body occurs on the same day as well: The newborn's ears are pierced. The baby girl is now authorized to enter into the world of feminine beautification.

In short, the newborn whose umbilical stump has just dropped off undergoes a set of two or three required rituals to mark the beginning of leaving the afterlife. What are the effects of these rituals for the caretaking of the baby?

The Call of Wrugbe

Once the umbilical stump drops off, the baby starts a long and difficult spiritual journey from *wrugbe*—but the process takes several years to complete. Here is an excerpt from a conversation I had with Kouakou Ba on the subject:

KB: At some point, children leave *wrugbe* for good and decide to stay in this life.

AG: How do you know when this has happened?

KB: When children can speak their dreams, or understand [a drastic situation, such as] that their mother or father has died, then you know that they've totally come out of *wrugbe*.

AG: When does that happen?

KB: By seven years old, for sure! At three years old, they're still in between—partly in *wrugbe* and partly in this life. They *see*

> what happens in this life, but they don't understand it. (K. Ba, personal communication, 1996)

During the liminal time of early childhood, the consciousness of the baby or toddler dwells sometimes in *wrugbe*, sometimes in this life. Parents should do everything possible to make this life comfortable and attractive, ensuring that their child is not tempted to return to *wrugbe*. For help with the bodily needs, a woman regularly consults her mother, her grandmother, and any other experienced mothers around her (Gottlieb, 2000). However, if an infant appears miserable for no reason, the baby may be endeavoring to communicate a spiritual need that most adults cannot understand. Such an infant is probably homesick for *wrugbe*. The parents should consult a diviner, who is considered an intermediary between the living and the ancestors (as well as bush spirits; Gottlieb, 1996; Gottlieb & Graham, 1994).

Indeed, mothers ought to consult diviners regularly during the early years of each of their children's existence, even if their children are not sick. One knowledgeable young man told me that in the "old days," mothers automatically consulted a diviner almost immediately after the birth of each baby (B. Kouadio, personal communication). Of course, this statement may well index an ideal that was not always realized in the case of all mothers and all babies. Still, the practice represents a behavioral model that is consistent with the Beng ideology of the life course.

Almost invariably, when diviners are first consulted by mothers, they recommend that the baby be given a cowry shell. Bertin explained:

> All babies must be given a cowry shell as a first gift, when the baby is born, because the cowry was important as currency for the ancestors—it was the second most important thing, after gold. The newborn had contact with the ancestors before birth, and the cowry shell reminds the baby of the previous life in *wrugbe*.
>
> Nowadays not all women contact a diviner immediately after the birth; they may wait for a day when the baby is in distress.

Another Beng friend added this commentary:

> Infants like money because they had money when they were living in *wrugbe*. In coming to this world, they all choose what they want. This

could be *wali pu* [French coins from the colonial era], or jewelry [usually cowry shells]—whatever is like what they had in *wrugbe*.

As with the grass necklace, an infant may wear a cowry shell or coin as an item of jewelry (bracelet or necklace). Diviners may recommend a single shell or coin, or they might suggest a number of cowries strung as a bracelet, or two or three coins strung on a cotton thread.[12]

At the psychological level, the message communicated to the parents by the diviner is that the infant needs to be valued more and to wear a visible sign of this value. western-trained child psychologists would probably applaud this practice, which encourages parents of a small creature to devote themselves to the needs of the often stressed, and stress-inducing, newborn (cf. Lewis & Rosenblum, 1974). A diviner's instructions to parents to buy jewelry for their crying child serves to remind them that the infant, while seemingly helpless and unable to communicate, was recently living a full life elsewhere and thus needs to be respected as a fellow person rather than being viewed as a suffering, wordless creature.

The fact of reincarnation proves critical in the life of some children in another way. It may be apparent from birth whose *wrugbe* ancestor the newborn embodies. As I quoted from Kouakou Ba earlier, if someone in the family dies on the day that a baby is born, this is taken as a sign of instant reincarnation (*e ta, e nu*: "s/he went, s/he returned"). Alternatively, a name that is shared, seemingly by coincidence, between infant and ancestor may indicate a reincarnation. For example, a nine-month-old girl had two names in common with her father's mother. Therefore, most villagers both referred to and addressed her as *mama*, or "grandma"—she was spoken about, and to, as if she were her grandmother.

A baby's identity may announce itself through misery. In some cases a diviner pronounces that a crying infant is unhappy with his or her name and prefers another one—usually to commemorate her or his *wrugbe* identity, or in honor of a bush spirit. For example, a baby named Kouassi cried day and night when he was one month old. His mother consulted Kouakou Ba, who said that Kouassi had been misnamed; his real name was Anie, after a local

sacred pool of water. After hearing Kouakou Ba's pronouncement, the baby's relatives began calling him "Anie."

Bearing an ancestral identity can have ramifications for the baby's life far beyond naming. Reincarnation can organize the manner in which caretakers treat particular infants. For example, a baby born following the deaths of two siblings is considered to embody the identity of one of those two siblings and is named "Sunu" (fem.) or "Wamyã" (masc.). As older children and adults, Wamyãs and Sunus are said to be prone toward depression because they can predict someone else's demise. Moreover, a funeral reminds Sunus and Wamyãs of their own previous deaths as well as that of their sibling, hence they are always among the saddest mourners. Considering their propensity for depression, one Beng friend told me that it would be terrible if a Sunu and a Wamyã married one another. On days they are both sad, they would be unable to care for their children: A mourning or depressed Sunu may fail to nurse her infant, and both she and her husband might refuse to work in the fields.

Not only do young children continue to exist part-time in *wrugbe*; they also retain ties to those who served as parents in *wrugbe*. These spirit-parents continue to look out for their baby after the infant has begun to leave the afterlife. Sometimes this can cause conflict with the parents of this life. The child's *wrugbe* parents will be displeased if they judge that the child's parents of this life are mistreating the baby, either through abuse or neglect. In such cases, the *wrugbe* parents may snatch the infant away to raise the child temporarily, waiting for a more suitable couple to emerge as parents of their *wrugbe* baby. This is one explanation Beng adults offer for the horrendously high infant and young child mortality rate in the region (Gottlieb, Forthcoming, chapter 10).

On hearing this, I asked Kouakou Ba to describe how a good parent acts toward a child. He answered:

> You should go to a diviner to find out what the baby wants, then go and buy that thing for the child. It's the child's *wrugbe* relatives—usually one of the baby's *wrugbe* parents—who has told the baby to cry, to say what the baby wants. Or sometimes it may be a spirit who's told this to the baby. Infants choose these desires to copy the objects they liked back in *wrugbe*—usually jewelry, money, or cowries. In any case, once the par-

languages in order to strip away excess linguistic baggage, as we might put it, and leave room for the language(s) that is (are) most appropriate for this life.[13]

This local model of language development may startle middle-class western readers who view young infants as lacking linguistic abilities. As the British author Penelope Leach (1983) has written, "At the beginning, a new infant has no language other than crying" (p. 62). The Beng model could not pose a starker contrast, for it posits a baby who is anything but prelinguistic. In fact, Beng infants are considered *maximally multilingual*—and the younger they are, the more this is so. Having only recently emerged from *wrugbe*, where everyone understood every language, Beng newborns are said to have fluent comprehension of every language spoken on this earth.

Others act on babies' reputed aural comprehension of all languages. Adults and older children speak regularly to even the youngest of infants, whose prior understanding of all languages is considered intact. In my hundreds of hours of observing babies with their mothers and other caretakers, I rarely saw five minutes go by when someone was not speaking directly to a given (awake) infant. For instance, a new mother I was visiting was holding her four-day-old daughter on her lap. The woman sat with her legs outstretched, leaning over the baby while chatting with me and two other friends. In between talking to us, she spoke to her baby regularly. At one point, her tiny daughter's eyes were open wide, and she asked her child tenderly, "*myé blicalò?*" ("Are you looking around?"). Likewise, on offering her breast, a mother often instructs her infant, "*nyo mi!*" ("Nurse!"). After each breastfeeding session, many mothers of infants, including newborns, directly question the little one, "*mí kanà?*" ("Are you full?"). A newborn is introduced to each visitor by being asked, "*dE kána? mí dò?*" ("Who's this? Do you know?"). A crying baby may be asked, "*pO mi maE?*" ("What's bothering you?"). The caretaker may continue with a series of diagnostic questions: "*yi mlu mi delò? yi mi delò? mi nO mi seelò? mi mi sONni batù?*" ("Are you thirsty? Are you hungry? Do you have a stomach ache? Do you have a fever?") and so on. Adults enjoy such conversations, knowing they make babies feel welcome in a strange new world.

> ents of this life discover the baby's desires, they should do all they can to indulge them. (K. Ba, personal communication, 1996)

From Kouakou Ba's statement we learn that the baby has desires but is unable to communicate them directly. Furthermore, we learn of the active role that *wrugbe* parents continue to take in their infants' lives even after the child has begun to enter this life, to the point of instructing the baby to weep to make a particular desire known. Through the infant, the *wrugbe* parents indirectly communicate to and instruct their counterparts in this life.

How does a diviner manage to understand such communications from the afterlife? Are babies as mute as they appear?

The Language of Wrugbe

One day I was playing "This Little Piggy" with the toes of my then six-month-old Beng "daughter," Amwe. As the last little piggy went home, I laughed at myself, musing that the baby couldn't possibly understand the ditty, which I'd said in English. The baby's natural mother, my friend Amenan, took my remark as an insult: Amenan insisted that "our" daughter understood perfectly what her American mother was chanting. When I appeared skeptical, Amenan described the linguistic situation of *wrugbe*. Unlike life in this world, she explained, different ethnic groups do not live apart from one another in the afterlife. Rather, members of all the world's peoples reside there together harmoniously. Associated with this ethnic mixture is a striking linguistic ecumenicism: In their conversations, the residents of *wrugbe* have full comprehension of one another's languages.

As they begin gradually to leave their previous existence behind, babies gradually give up their knowledge of languages other than the one(s) spoken around them daily. However, as we have seen, emerging from *wrugbe* is a slow process requiring several years. Until it is complete, the child continues to understand the many languages spoken in *wrugbe*—though with diminishing comprehension. In sum, in the Beng model of language development, infants do not learn a new language subsequent to a prelinguistic phase, as the western folk model posits. Instead, babies are seen as progressively *losing* their understanding of previously known

This active verbal interaction that adults and older children have with babies replicates the local ideology of the afterlife. If that model posits linguistically competent infants, it is appropriate for speech to be directed regularly at actual babies. Praxis replicates ideology in a directly observable way.

Beyond aural comprehension, how is speech production explained? The babbling of babies is routinely remarked upon, delighted in, and encouraged—not only by mothers, but by siblings, grandparents, other relatives, neighbors, indeed anyone who observes it. For instance, Tahan once observed her seven-month-old son looking with interest at two nearby pigs who were grunting. When the pigs quieted, the baby made noises that Tahan interpreted as imitating the animals. She clapped her hands with pleasure and exclaimed, "*ja, e za dõ*!" Literally, this meant, "So, he understands things!"; figuratively, it meant, "So, he's smart!"—attesting to a perceived connection between speech and intelligence even in young infants.

The implications for education are striking. Although infants are not seen as requiring guidance in *understanding* the speech of others, they are seen as requiring guidance in *producing* their own recognizable speech. Indeed, in earlier times, a newborn heard to speak a recognizable word in a known language would have been killed for violating the laws of the life cycle, for Beng adults recognize that newborns should not utter real words, despite their fluent *comprehension* of all languages. Both to acknowledge the need for infants to learn to speak, and to hasten their move from *wrugbe* into this world, adults take an active role in teaching their infants to speak the Beng language by "speaking for" them.

In this routine, an adult asks a question directly of an infant. Whoever is minding the baby answers in the first person as if she were the child, in effect prompting the infant with lines—to repeat months later when the infant is capable of articulate speech. In one case, a baby of about seven months was seated on a mat on the ground without anyone obviously serving as a caretaker. Someone asked the baby how he was, and no one replied. When the only adult nearby (an unrelated woman) realized the situation, she immediately provided the appropriate first person answer—"*nn, n kenè*" ("Yes, I'm fine")—and apologized for not

having answered sooner. As this story reveals, adults consider it critical to acknowledge the linguistic abilities of infants.

However, the babble of Beng infants is not *always* rewarded by adults. Adults train babies not to interrupt others' speech, as part of the culturally sanctioned pattern of children showing deference to their elders. Where adults in other societies may exclude infants from the category of conversational partners, hence deem them unworthy of linguistic education (Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984), the Beng attitude is quite different. Considered capable of understanding language from their prior life in *wrugbe*, infants are seen as trainable in adult norms of politeness. For example, my friend Amenan and I were once chatting with some neighbors in her courtyard. Her six-month-old grandson, Sassandra, sat nearby on a mat, making adorable baby noises that were so loud that we adults were unable to continue our conversation. Amenan told her young grandson solemnly, "*mi jolE twaà!*" ("Stop your speaking!"), as she might gently rebuke an older child. In other words, she was taking infant babble seriously enough to treat it as she would the language of older children, subject to the same sociolinguistic norms of politeness.

As the foregoing implies, when babies leave *wrugbe* their major linguistic task is envisioned as *forgetting* the irrelevant languages of the afterlife—rather than *learning* an entirely new language, as most westerners consider the case. With such a model of the life cycle, the major challenge of Beng caretakers is not to *teach* infants language, but to *learn from them* so as to satisfy whatever desires their babies bring with them to this life. However, how can parents discover the specific nature of these desires when babies are incapable of articulating them? For despite a relatively positive and encouraging attitude by Beng adults toward the babbling of their babies, the verbalizing abilities of Beng infants are considered problematic by adults. Babies are said to be capable of communicating their desires and thoughts, but most adults are incapable of understanding these efforts. The diviner Kouakou Ba explained to me that when a baby cries, she or he is speaking the language of *wrugbe*. Apart from crying, babies may also communicate by failing to defecate or to breastfeed. However, none of these communicative acts is readily understandable to the baby's parents, who

emerged definitively from that other life too long ago to remember its language. To have their infant's cries or digestive irregularities translated, the services of a diviner are required.

In Beng villages, diviners serve as intermediaries between the land of the currently living and the land of the previously living. They do this by using the services of intermediaries themselves: spirits (*bONzO*) who speak both the language of the other world—which babies still speak—and that of this world. Thus, it is a multitiered system of translation: The spirits (or *wrugbe* parents) speak first with the infant, who then announces—albeit ineffectively—his or her desires via crying or digestive upsets. In turn, the parents consult a diviner, who summons the spirits, who then speak for the baby. Finally, the diviner conveys the baby's desires to the bewildered parents of this life. In this way, the *wrugbe* identity of the infant is maintained in this world and the infant manages, through intermediaries, to communicate complex desires to the parents of this life.

In short, the liminal status of infants, who straddle two geospiritual spaces, mandates specific caretaking behaviors that account for much of how babies are handled. Ideology provides a blueprint, a "model for" behavior (by adults), that looks quite different from the western educational "model for" behavior, while caretaking praxis creates a "model of" ideology that looks quite different form the western educational "model of" ideology (Geertz, 1973). In the Beng model, infants are accorded a high level of agency—an agency that is seen not only as biological but also intellectual, with babies attributed a high level of consciousness that must be decoded by an elite group of adults with special translation skills. In these ways, Beng ideas about infant nature and childcare create a cultural script that is decidedly distinct from dominant western models of early childhood education.

Conclusions

In this chapter, I have argued that the dominant western models of education, no matter how diverse their variations and however unconsciously they may operate in given pedagogical settings, are generally based in a particular cultural agenda that, *ipso facto*, does not apply in all cultural settings. As Bruner (1996) has writ-

ten so bitingly, with the dominant western paradigm of pedagogy-as-usual, "teaching is fitted into a mold in which a single, presumably omniscient teacher explicitly tells or shows presumably unknowing learners something they presumably know nothing about" (p. 20). In keeping with Bruner's cultural critique, I have tried to highlight the culturally particular nature of western education by offering a very different model of education found in the West African rain forest. Through this case study, I have endeavored to demonstrate that the hegemonic western model of education would make no sense in the context of early childhood education as understood in at least one corner of rural West Africa.

In Beng villages, a far different model of young childhood operates, hence a far different model of teaching applies. Rather than the parent or other caretaker being accorded the role of teacher as occurs in most western(ized) settings, in the Beng world, the infant is considered to have the most to say, and the parents' major job is not to *teach* but instead to *learn from* the young child—specifically, to learn what he or she remembers, misses, and desires from a previous life elsewhere.

Although there are no formal daycare centers in Beng villages—childcare still operates relatively effectively through family and village networks (Gottlieb, Forthcoming, Chapter 6)—it is conceivable that urban Beng families may occasionally find themselves interested in the services of such facilities. However, given the foregoing description of Beng infancy and young childhood, one can speculate that such centers might need to provide very different models of caretaker-infant/toddler relations than they commonly offer if Beng families were to feel comfortable using their services. The common model for such centers is to leave infants on their own as long as they appear content, alternating (in the higher-quality centers) with stimulating the babies in order to teach them specific cognitive and motor skills (fitting puzzle pieces together, naming objects, identifying colors, and so on). This approach would at best baffle Beng parents. At worst, Beng parents might even consider it abusive. I would predict that in most Beng people's views, daycare "teachers" ought to spend most of their time wetnursing, carrying, and finding other means to

comfort and welcome the babies and learning from their small charges what they most desire via the services of a diviner. Put crudely, it is the babies and toddlers who should be the "teachers," not those who are hired as such.

In sum, the anthropological imperative to investigate the lives of others, especially to listen to and understand others' perspectives on their own lives, can enrich the increasingly global study of education. Cases such as the one I have explored in this chapter should stimulate us to identify and limn the contours of other local models of education before the increasingly hegemonic model of western-style education as developed to date is exported ever more relentlessly, and uncritically, around the world.

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In this chapter, some personal names used are pseudonyms.

Notes

1 Examples of ethnographic work in single schools or classrooms include Lightfoot (1983) and Mehan (1979) among many others. On the anthropological approach to education, see Smith (1992) for a general statement; for a collection of articles by key contributors to the anthropology of education, see Spindler (2000); for a roundup of interdisciplinary literature, see Ardichvili (this volume). A theoretical beacon in much of the most thoughtful interdisciplinary literature on education over the past four decades has been Jerome Bruner; for a recent work, see Bruner (1996).

2 Ethnic, class, and religious distinctions also shape caretaking in the earliest months of childhood. My remarks are especially relevant to Euro-American families of the middle and upper classes. The extent to which they pertain to other western groups is variable.

3 To date, I have conducted 21 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Beng villages (1979–1993). For an ethnography of Beng society, see Gottlieb (1996). For a fieldwork memoir, see Gottlieb & Graham (1994).

4 E.g., Creider (1986), MacGaffey (1986), Okri (1991), Oluwole (1992), Uchendu (1965). A comparative study across the continent might reveal significant convergences and correlations.

5 I focus on life in rural villages, where most Beng people still live. Among Beng mothers living in towns and cities, childcare practices seem to vary; I have not yet investigated these systematically.

6 The title of this section (the working title of a book I am completing on this subject) speaks both respectfully and critically to a posthumous volume of

essays by the noted psychoanalyst, D. W. Winnicott, *Home Is Where We Start From* (1986), whose title is itself inspired by a line from T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*.

7 Cf. Ardener (1989, pp. 117, 123 et passim) on "demographic false consciousness" and "folk-demography."

8 Somewhat similar "contradictions" (by western standards) exist elsewhere in Africa; for example, Yoruba posit that ancestors exist at both individual and collective levels simultaneously (John Peel, personal communication).

9 For scientific studies cross-culturally of umbilical cord separation, see Novack, Mueller, & Ochs (1988); Bhalla et al. (1975); Arad, Eyal, & Fainmesser (1981).

10 Extended symbolic elaboration of the umbilical stump is documented elsewhere in West Africa (e.g., Uchendu 1965, pp. 58–59, for the Igbo).

11 For photos, see DeLoache & Gottlieb (2000, pp. 15, 74, inside back cover).

12 The ancient French coins are sometimes sold in local markets, though they are increasingly rare. Cowry shells are more readily available in the markets.

13 The Beng model has some parallels to a current *scholarly* model of early language development (Werker, 1989).

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