



Do Infants Have Religion? The Spiritual Lives of Beng Babies

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Do Infants Have Religion?

The Spiritual Lives of Beng Babies

ANTHROPOLOGICAL EXPLORATIONS of religion have tended to focus on the lives, experiences, and viewpoints of adults. The great canonical works have scarcely a word to say about how religion might affect children's lives. Robertson Smith wrote nothing about the religion of *young* Semites. Frazer never considered how divine kingship might influence children's play styles. Durkheim did not investigate the way that organized groups of boys and girls might intersect with organized groups of adults in creating an effervescence of spirit. Weber neglected to speculate on the effect that Protestant faith might have on child-rearing practices.

With only a few exceptions, social scientists today continue to assume the irrelevance of early childhood to spirituality, and silence still reigns concerning the religious and ritual experiences of minors.¹ If this is true of young children, it is even more so of infants, who are perhaps the most systematically ignored of all human groups by anthropologists.²

In my own fieldwork, I relied in part on methods that Victor Turner enunciated long ago (1973) for the decoding of symbolic phenomena: exploration of informants' own exigences, identification of the operational meanings of symbols in particular ritual and social contexts, and provisional establishing of a model or grammar of positional meanings of such symbols in a wide variety of social contexts. Of course with infants the great frustration relates to the first level of this methodology: very young children do not make reliable informants, at least not when anthropologists define conversation in the usual way. To counteract this limitation, I relied on diviners, those Beng adults who themselves purport to speak for infants after speaking with the spirits who themselves speak for crying babies. To complement this "adultocentric" perspective, I spent approximately 700 hours with infants themselves, en-

gaging more in bodily than verbal communication, in keeping with recent works suggesting that much can be learned from the nonverbal "languages."³ I found this dual strategy an acceptable compromise to a methodological challenge. With such a combination of approaches, the experiences of infants themselves should become at least partly accessible to the gaze of an outside observer. Indeed, the very definition of *experience* may be redefined if we agree to expand the corpus of communication channels to include both the spiritual and the bodily, in this case, "to identify the existential conditions that constitute the experiential world of Beng babies" (John McCall, personal communication, November 1996; see Bruner and Turner 1986).

The Spiritual Lives of Beng Infants

Most Western folk models of child development imply a mute and uncomprehending newborn arriving for the first time in the world of humans from a restricted uterine life of minimal stimulation and no social interaction as such. Before that, the biological model underlying all this further implies, the fetus was a mere zygote of a few cells, and before those cells were joined, it had no existence whatsoever. Hence the Western caretaker of an infant, whether the mother or anyone else, usually attends to the bodily needs of the young tot with great care but may pay less attention to social relational concerns and virtually none to spiritual ones.⁴

The Beng view of fetal development is quite different. Beng adults maintain that infants lead profoundly spiritual lives. In fact, the younger they are, the more thoroughly spiritual their existence is said to be. Affiliated with this spirituality is a set of infant care practices demanded of a caretaker. To understand this indigenous conception of infants' spirituality, we must investigate 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.⁵ It is also well known for South

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Asia and Native North America (Mills and Slobodin 1994). But we anthropologists have rarely asked what the implications of this common ideology may be for the treatment of infants and their experiences. In the Beng context, let us trace their life course.⁶

The Afterlife Is Where We Come From

In the Beng world, infants emerge not from a land of regressively diminishing life but from a rich existence in a place that adults call *wrugbe*.⁷ Several Beng adults agreed that *wrugbe* is dispersed among invisible neighborhoods in major cities in Africa and Europe, though different people named different cities.⁸

The literal meaning of *wrugbe* is “spirit village (or town).” In Western languages, with their roots in the Judeo-Christian tradition, a likely translation of *wrugbe* would be “afterlife,” the place to which the *wru* (spirit) of a person travels once that person’s body dies and the *neneŋ* (soul) transforms to a *wru*. But the term *afterlife*, while evocative, is not entirely accurate for two reasons. First, it implies that the ordinary or unmarked place and time of orientation are this human existence and that once one dies, one goes “afterwards” to a space where one stays, presumably for eternity. In contrast, Beng souls go to *wrugbe* as a waystation; after some time (whose duration is variable), they are reborn as newborn humans. Yet even *waystation* is not ethnographically apt, as this suggests a liminal time and place of transit. In contrast, it is “this life” that is seen by at least some Beng, certainly by religious specialists and others who think deeply about such eschatological matters, as the ephemeral site of transit whose ultimate goal is to reach the land of the ancestors (cf. MacGaffey 1986). Second, from the perspective of infancy, what is significant is that, in the Beng view, infants have just recently been living their lives in a previous and invisible existence. Thus for the Beng, what English speakers would term the *afterlife* might alternatively be termed a *beforelife*. Yet this term implies a finite end to one’s life, whereas the doctrine of reincarnation is based on a cyclical trajectory, with no beginning and no end and death itself as a kind of life.

My understanding of the contours of *wrugbe* has been gained through a series of conversations over the years with many Beng people, especially religious specialists, both Masters of the Earth (*ba gbali*) and diviners (*srandin*). During my last visit, one diviner named Kouakou Ba regularly shared with me his exceptional knowledge of *wrugbe*. Still in his late twenties, Kouakou Ba had already built up a large following because of his reputation for speaking the truth based on early training as a diviner. Here is how he explained his understanding of the temporal as well as, we might say, the demographic dimensions 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.

Two issues that emerge from this statement warrant discussion. First is that of personal identity. In the Beng model, everyone is considered to be a reincarnation of an ancestor. Some people know whose prior identity has returned in them; others do not, although there is no general set of terms to distinguish the two types of people. But if an individual knows his or her prior identity, then, as we shall see, others may treat this person in particular ways, according to the ancestor’s personality and life circumstances.

We also need to investigate the demographic implications of Kouakou Ba’s statement. As a first pass, we might be tempted to put them in economic terms. The indigenous conception of demography that each human life given (from *wrugbe*) must be counterbalanced by one taken (back to *wrugbe*) might be recast as a zero-sum conception of human life. But does this necessarily imply an empirically stable population, with births and deaths delicately balanced? This would hardly be possible at any given moment, as the number of births and deaths may vary according to a complex array of factors that are surely impossible to balance. For our purposes, what is significant is that this ideology of reincarnation-as-demographic-balance operates at the ideological level regardless of actual demographic fluctuations.⁹

This potential lack of “fit” between ideology and praxis, as we might put it, is mirrored at another level. Once someone dies, the *neneŋ* or soul is transformed into a *wru* or spirit. Yet 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.¹⁰

The boundary between *wrugbe* and this life is permeable in another way. While *wrugbe* is said to be located in distant countries or metropolises where the lifestyle of the living residents is quite different from that of rural Beng villagers, Beng adults do not perceive *wrugbe* as unreachable. Indeed, I was told of several living adults who had managed to travel invisibly to *wrugbe* (in their dreams) in order to converse with ancestors, then returned easily to tell the tale. When I expressed amazement (no doubt influenced unconsciously by the classical Greek conception of the

afterlife imbued in me in high school, with its formidable Cerberus guarding the entrance to Hades), my interlocutor assured me that anyone could converse with an ancestor and that the (dreamtime) journey to wrugbe itself is not dangerous.

Reciprocally, until recently the wrus of Beng ancestors themselves were said to traverse back and forth between wrugbe and this life on a daily basis. Before local officials of the Ivoirian government ordered all thatched-roofed houses to be destroyed in the late 1960s, the Beng lived in large, round dwellings that accommodated an extended family (Gottlieb 1992:135–136). This was meant to include not only the living but also the dead. Every night, someone in the household put out a small bowl of food for the ancestors of the family. At night, the last person to retire closed the door, locking in the living and the dead to sleep together. In the morning, the first person to open the door released the wrus, who traveled back to wrugbe for the day, to return at night for their dinner and sleeping spot once again.

Considering this regular traffic between wrugbe and this life and considering that infants have just emerged from wrugbe, what are the implications for the day-to-day experiences of babies?

The Umbilical Cord: Lifeline to Wrugbe

Until the umbilical cord stump falls off, the newborn is not considered to have emerged from wrugbe at all, and the tiny creature is not seen as a person (*sòn*). Hence if the newborn should die during those first few days, there is no funeral, and the fact is not announced publicly. In this case the infant's passing is not conceived as a death, just a return in bodily form to the space that the infant was still psychically inhabiting.

Beng women told me that the umbilical stump usually drops off on the third or fourth day, and this was indeed the case for all of the many Beng newborns I have observed during my fieldwork. This schedule is rather on the fast end of the scale when viewed cross-culturally.¹¹ If my Beng informants' comments are accurate and my own observations representative, the Beng pattern appears to be somewhat accelerated compared to other regions of the world. How can we account for this relatively rapid development on the part of Beng infants?

Medical researchers have observed that "age at cord separation has been shown to be associated with the agent used for umbilical cord care" (Novack et al. 1988:220; see also Arad et al. 1981). Beng women apply an herbal mixture to a newborn's umbilical stump that may indeed shorten the number of days that the cord remains attached to the navel. The intention is to dry out the moist cord fragment quickly, enabling it to wither and drop off, allowing the infant to begin its spiritual journey from wrugbe to this life. Beng women take this

responsibility seriously. When I asked how many times the mixture is applied to a newborn, I was skeptical when I heard from several women that it is applied "constantly," but my own subsequent observations confirmed their claim. Next to every newborn sits an older woman, usually the baby's maternal grandmother, who dabs a tiny bit of an herbal mixture on the dangling cord every few minutes.

The day that a baby's umbilical cord stump falls off is momentous, for the newborn has just begun to emerge from wrugbe. This is a gradual process that will take several years to complete. Both to mark the beginning of this slow passage and to inaugurate it more actively, the infant's mother, along with some of her female relatives, conduct two or three bodily rituals of transformation on the tiny new person.¹² First, they administer an enema to the baby (called *gbele fāle*, "splitting the anus"), clearly causing distress to the crying child. A mother knows that she will hurt her infant; still, women looked at me with incredulity when I inquired whether or not they might have pity on their newborns and delay the ritual for some time. This is clearly not an option.

For her first child, a mother is taught how to administer such an enema by the female elder who has been bathing her baby four times a day since the birth (Gottlieb n.d.). She uses the leaves of a particular plant (*kprɔkprɔ láná*, unidentified) crushed together with one chili pepper and some warm water. From the next day forward, the mother will administer such an enema twice a day to her baby (in the morning and at night). An older child often receives 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."¹³

Typically a few hours after the first enema, the newborn is the subject of a second major ritual. The maternal grandmother (or another older woman) makes a necklace (*dē*) from a savanna grass of the same name (Figure 1). This necklace will be worn night and day by the infant to encourage general health and growth, until it eventually tears and falls off. At that point, depending on the baby's age and the mother's industry, it may or may not be replaced. Only after this first necklace is applied can the mother or grandmother begin to add other items of jewelry. The actual ritual is held in a rather secluded and dimly lit space (inside the bedroom of the infant's mother) with a somewhat solemn tone. Finally, once the umbilical cord falls off the newborn, 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. Now she is authorized to enter into the world of feminine beautification. Having seen the newborn

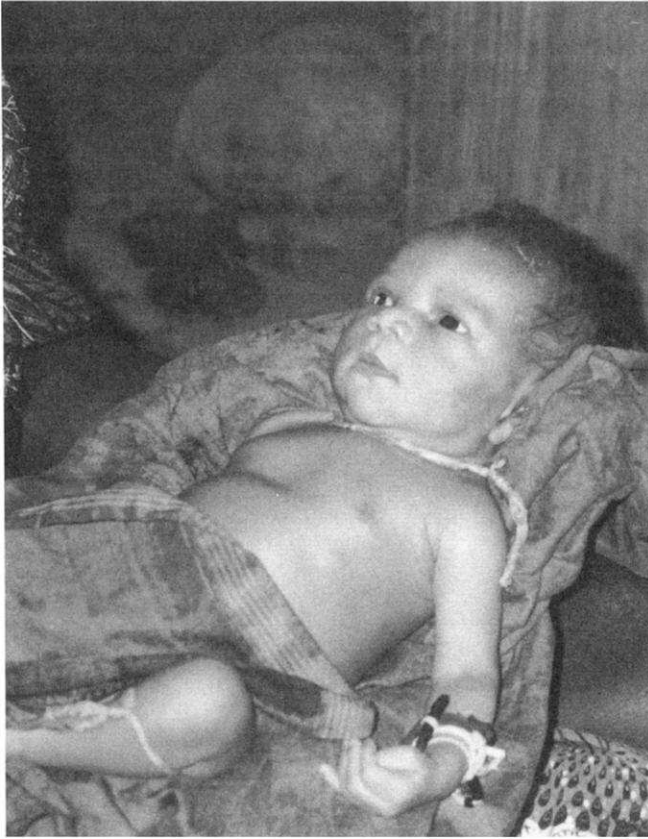


Figure 1

Newborn with newly prepared necklace(*dɛ*), bracelets, and knee-band. Photo by Alma Gottlieb.

undergo a set of two to three required rituals, let us explore the aftereffects of these processes.

The Call of Wrugbe

Once the umbilical stump drops off, the baby is said to start a long and difficult spiritual journey emerging from wrugbe, but the process takes several years to complete.¹⁴ Here is an excerpt from a conversation that 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.

During the liminal time of early childhood, the consciousness of the baby or toddler is sometimes in

wrugbe and sometimes in this life. Parents ought to do all they can to make this life comfortable and attractive for their infant, to ensure that their child is not tempted to return to wrugbe. For help with the bodily needs, a mother regularly consults her mother, her grandmother, or any other experienced mother around her (Gottlieb 1995b). But sometimes an infant appears miserable for no obvious reason. In this case, the Beng say the baby is endeavoring to communicate a spiritual need that the parents are unable to understand. Such an infant is probably homesick for wrugbe. This is where diviners enter the picture, for these specialists are seen as intermediaries between the living and the ancestors, as well as between the living and bush spirits (Gottlieb 1992: ch. 2; Gottlieb and Graham 1993). Indeed, given the special space occupied by diviners, mothers ought to consult them regularly during the early years of their children's existence, even if their children are not sick. Along these lines, one knowledgeable young man named Bertin told me that in the "old days" mothers automatically consulted a diviner almost immediately after the birth of each of their babies. This statement may well index a goal that was not always realized. For one thing, diviners cost money, even if it is a modest sum by local standards (typically 50 CFA; currently U.S.\$1 = ca. 500 CFA). As elsewhere, some mothers are more devoted to their children than others, some are more concerned about avoiding future complications, some are more willing to spend scarce resources to gather items judged culturally necessary for their children's well-being, and some simply have more money. Still, the practice outlined by Bertin represents an operative ideal that is clearly consistent with the Beng ideology of the life course.

Almost invariably, when diviners are consulted by parents, usually mothers, they recommend that the new mother give a cowrie shell to their baby. Bertin put it this way:

All babies must be given a cowrie shell as a first gift, when the baby is born, because the cowrie 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 cowrie 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. Other mothers may give a cowrie shell to the baby as a personal gift, though they weren't told to do so by a diviner.

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 cowrie shells]: whatever is like what they had in wrugbe.

As with the *dě*, an infant may wear the cowrie shell or coin as an item of jewelry, usually a bracelet. Diviners may recommend a single shell or coin, or they might suggest a number of cowries strung close together on a bracelet, or two or three coins strung on a cotton thread.¹⁵ The mother may leave the jewelry on the baby continually, washing it carefully during the baths she gives her child. Alternatively, she may put the bracelet or necklace on the infant on particular days relative to the spiritual calendar.

At the psychological level, the message being communicated to the parents by the diviner is that the infant needs to be valued more and needs to wear a visible sign of this value. Western-trained child psychologists would probably applaud this practice, as it encourages parents of a small creature who cries regularly to devote themselves to the needs of the often stressed, and stress-inducing, newborn (see Lewis and Rosenblum 1974). A diviner's instructions to parents to buy jewelry for their crying child may serve to remind parents 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 may prove critical in the life of a given newborn in another way. It may be apparent from the 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*, "he/she came, 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 I knew had a series of names: *Kla Ajua Ndri Amélie*. Most villagers addressed her directly (and referred to her) as *mama* (grandma). This is because the baby was said to be the reincarnation of her father's mother, *Bande Kla Ajua*, with whom she had two names in common ("Kla," an ancient family name, and "Ajua," a day name for girls born on a Tuesday); hence she was spoken to (and about) as if she were that ancestor.

A baby's identity may make itself known through misery. In some cases the diviner may pronounce that the infant is unhappy with the name that has been bestowed upon it and prefers another one, usually to commemorate her or his *wrugbe* identity. Such renaming can also take place for a spirit rather than an ancestor. For example, a baby named Kouassi cried day and night when he was a month old. In despair, his mother consulted Kouakou Ba, who said that the baby was crying for two reasons. First, Kouassi "wanted" two bracelets on his left hand: one with cowrie shells, the other of *ɲà ti* (silver). Second, he had been misnamed; his real name was Anie, after a local sacred pool of water. After

hearing Kouakou Ba's pronouncement, the baby's mother found the required bracelets, and she and the baby's relatives began calling him "Anie." According to reports, after these two changes Anie stopped crying.

Bearing an ancestral identity can have ramifications for the baby's life far beyond naming. Such a fact can serve to organize the manner in which infants are treated. For example, girls and boys who were born following the deaths of two siblings in the family are inevitably called "Sunu" and "Wamyā" respectively (names with no other meanings as such). Such infants are seen as the reincarnation of one of those two now-deceased siblings. Like all Beng children who die, the dead siblings had been buried in a muddy patch behind the home. Being a reincarnation of one of those, Sunus and Wamyās remember their recent resting place; thus they are said to like mud. As a result, their mothers may pat mud over their small bodies as infants or even older children.

The reincarnated identities of Wamyās and Sunus may have consequences for the development of their personality well beyond infancy. For example, as older children and adults, they are said to be prone to depression and can predict someone else's demise. If a Wamyā or Sunu appears depressed or acts aggressively without cause, people worry that someone is about to die. For instance, one day a nine-year-old Sunu spent the entire afternoon hitting her older sister for no apparent reason. Family members and neighbors worried aloud that it was a bad omen. The next morning, two deaths were announced in the village. On hearing the news, the girl's mother and aunts said, "So that's why she was hitting her older sister yesterday!" The deaths confirmed for them the ability of Sunus to foretell death.

A funeral reminds everyone named Sunu or Wamyā of the death of their own previous incarnation as well as that of their sibling; hence they are always among the saddest mourners. To commemorate this, all Sunus and Wamyās, from infants to very old people, wear a special necklace and/or bracelet during any funeral they attend (Figure 2). Considering their propensity for depression, one Beng friend told me, it would be a terrible mistake for a Sunu and a Wamyā to marry one another. On days they are both sad, they would be unable to take care of 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.

People named Sunu or Wamyā are said to have difficult personalities (*sie grégré*), and their parents may seek validation of this psychological diagnosis through divination. For instance, my friend Au told me that, when she was pregnant with her son, her uncle consulted a diviner, who predicted that his niece would have a child who would be very difficult, crying a lot. But Au shouldn't become too upset or angry about this



Figure 2

Infant wearing Sunu bracelet. Photo by Alma Gottlieb.

child's behavior; otherwise the baby would leave the family and return to wrugbe (i.e., die).

Au assumed that this prediction applied to the baby she was carrying, but in fact he turned out to be easygoing. During her next pregnancy, she thought back to the diviner's prediction, but this child too turned out to be relatively unflappable, as was her next. It was only with her last one that the prediction was finally validated, as her daughter Jeanne turned out to be a "wrugbe Sunu" who indeed exhibited a difficult personality. The diagnosis was made by an old woman related patrilineally to Au. During a village funeral, she dreamt that Jeanne had been a "Sunu" while living in wrugbe. As a wrugbe Sunu, people thought, Jeanne would have an even more difficult personality than an ordinary Sunu would.

Not surprisingly, this foretelling has proved accurate. When she was starting to walk, Jeanne wanted to stay on her mother's back all day while Au worked in the fields. If Au put her down, Jeanne stamped right in front of her mother wherever she was walking, or she dared Au to cut her with a machete and then had a temper tantrum. Her older sister Afwe had been designated as

Jeanne's babysitter (*len kūli*), whose primary job was to carry her younger sister. But Jeanne frequently hit Afwe while being carried on her back, and Afwe wasn't always able, or willing, to carry Jeanne.

As she has grown older, Jeanne's difficult personality has remained, frightening other children in the *quartier*; she even provokes disputes and physical fights. One day I videotaped about a half an hour of a temper tantrum that Jeanne threw in two adjoining courtyards. Enraged at a perceived slight, she toppled furniture and hurled pails around her, behavior that would be quite unheard of for someone without the spiritual profile that Jeanne possesses.

In short, it is clear that Jeanne has internalized her identity as a wrugbe Sunu. This should not be surprising. Because she often hears others discuss the difficult personality that is assumed to accompany a wrugbe identity, Jeanne is aware of the expectation that she act difficult. As psychologists might say, the "labeling" has been successful (Rosenthal and Jacobson 1968).

Not only does a child continue after birth to lead a parallel life in wrugbe, but a child is said to retain the wrugbe parents, who continue to look out for their baby even after the infant has begun to leave the afterlife. In some instances, 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. For instance, the mother may not be breastfeeding her infant often enough or offering enough solid foods to an older infant. She may let her baby cry, may wait before taking her sick baby to a diviner or a healer, or may use poverty as an excuse to avoid buying the items (such as jewelry or coins) or conducting the sacrifices that a diviner declares necessary to the baby's spiritual well-being. Any of these may have dire consequences: the wrugbe parents may decide to snatch the infant away back to wrugbe, where they will raise the child temporarily, waiting for a more suitable couple to emerge as future parents of their baby. This, then, is one explanation (though not the only one) that is offered by Beng adults to account for the horrendously high infant and young child mortality rate in the region (Gottlieb n.d.).

On hearing this, I asked Kouakou Ba to describe a good parent. He answered without hesitation:

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 have 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 parents of this life discover the



Figure 3

Sunu infant girl with numerous protective necklaces, waist bands, and bracelets (including cowrie shells and ancient French coins), many prescribed by a diviner. Photo by Alma Gottlieb.

baby's desires, they should do all they can to indulge them. [See Figure 3.]

From Kouakou Ba's statement we learn that the baby has desires but is unsure how to communicate them directly. Accordingly, we learn of the active role that wrugbe parents continue to take in their infant's life even after the child has begun to enter this life, to the point of instructing the baby to cry to make a particular desire known. Through the infant, the wrugbe parents are indirectly communicating to and instructing their counterparts in this life.

Of course there is something a bit self-serving about Kouakou Ba's answer. In his view, a "good enough parent," as D. W. Winnicott would call her (see, for example, Winnicott 1987), is one who gives *him* regular business. His economic motives for encouraging clients to consult him notwithstanding, how does a diviner such as Kouakou Ba manage to communicate with his

infant clients? For their part, are babies as inarticulate as this account suggests?

The Language of Wrugbe

One day I was playing *This Little Piggy* with the toes of my six-month-old Beng daughter Amwe. As the last little piggy went home, I laughed aloud at myself, acknowledging that the baby couldn't possibly understand the words of the ditty, all the more because they were in English. The baby's Beng mother Amenan objected strongly to my remark, which she took as an insult. Amenan insisted that our daughter understood perfectly well all that her American mother was saying. When I asked somewhat skeptically, "You think so?", Amenan explained the linguistic situation of wrugbe. Unlike life in this world, she pointed out, different ethnic groups do not live apart from one another in the afterlife. Rather, members of all the world's ethnic groups live there together harmoniously. Associated with this ethnic mixture is a striking degree of linguistic ecumenicism. When the residents of wrugbe speak to each other in their own languages, everyone understands, with full mutual comprehension.¹⁶

In the minds of many middle-class Western parents, young infants are seen as lacking linguistic abilities. As popular British author Penelope Leach writes unequivocally, "At the beginning a new infant has no language other than crying" (1983:62). The Beng model could not pose a starker contrast, for it posits a baby who is anything but "prelinguistic." In fact, among the Beng, infants are said to be as *multilingual* as imaginable. Having only recently emerged from wrugbe, where everyone understands every language, Beng newborns have full comprehension not only of Beng but of every language spoken on this earth.

Furthermore, Beng infants are said to begin gradually to leave their previous existence behind. This includes gradually giving up their knowledge of languages other than the one spoken around and to them daily. But as we have also seen, this emergence from wrugbe is a very slow process that takes several years. Until it is complete, the child continues to understand the many languages spoken in wrugbe, though with only sporadic and diminishing comprehension. In sum, Beng infants are doing the opposite of learning new languages subsequent to a prelinguistic phase, as a popular Western folk model posits. Instead, they are *losing* old languages in order to strip away excess linguistic baggage, as we might put it, and leave room for the languages that are most appropriate for this life.¹⁷

Some scholars have claimed that the language used to address infants and teach them language (sometimes called "baby talk" or, more Eurocentrically, "motherese") has identifiable features that are universal (e.g., Ferguson

1977; Snow 1977). Critics have pointed out that cross-cultural data to support this assertion are quite scarce and do not all support the theory (e.g., Crago 1992:31; Ochs and Schieffelin 1984). This qualitative issue is related to a more quantitative one. Psycholinguists and sociolinguists have shown that the amount of speech that adults (and older children) address directly to infants is quite variable even intraculturally, let alone cross-culturally.¹⁸ In the short run, infants and toddlers who are addressed directly and regularly tend to begin speaking somewhat earlier and to acquire larger and more precise vocabularies than do their counterparts who are not (Judy De Loache, personal communication, September 1996; Smiley and Huttenlocher 1995). In the long run, however, virtually all healthy humans learn to speak their native language with a high degree of fluency no matter how often adults or older children spoke to them directly as infants (e.g., Snow et al. 1979:287). And in any case, mothers and other caretakers have a large range of ways to communicate with babies beyond actual speech (e.g., Bullowa 1979).

How does the Beng situation illuminate these issues? Among the Beng, the babbling of babies as well as speech addressed directly to them is not only valued but in fact encouraged. Because Beng babies are said to have a passive understanding of all languages spoken to them, adults consider it appropriate to make use of that passive understanding. Thus older people address speech directly to infants and even to newborns, often continually (Figure 4). 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 a bit 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 tenderly, "Myé blicalò?" (Are you looking around?). I saw linguistic encounters such as this replicated by virtually every mother or other infant caretaker whom I visited during my research on this topic. While I was not studying the actual speech registers used to address infants, in my observations people tended to simplify and slow their speech, as is common among middle-class, Euro-American caretakers speaking with infants, presumably making it more "user friendly" for the babies themselves. I suggest that this very active level of verbal interaction that Beng adults have with babies is consistent with the local ideology of the afterlife. Thus at a theoretical level, we might say that behavior replicates ideology in a directly observable way.

On another note, I observe that the Beng pattern of mothers addressing their newborns and older infants

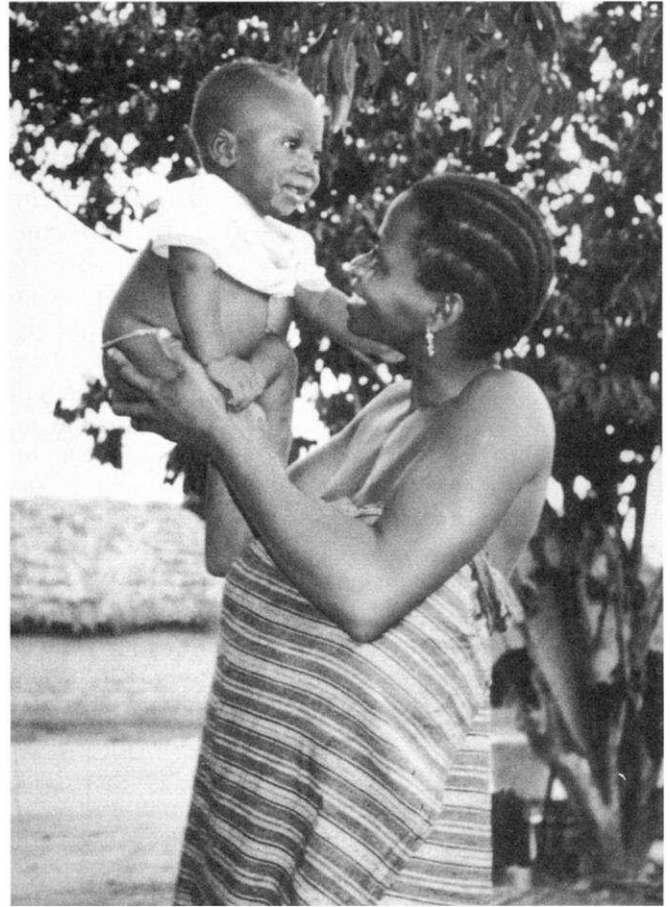


Figure 4

Infant boy and his mother. Photo by Alma Gottlieb.

face-to-face on a regular basis allows us to reevaluate a widely discussed hypothesis suggested by Robert LeVine (1984, 1987) that rural, unschooled women living in the technologically underdeveloped world are too preoccupied with ensuring the mere physical survival of their infants to enjoy the luxury of speaking to them face-to-face, and more generally to enjoy a high level of emotional involvement with them (LeVine 1973, 1977; LeVine et al. 1994:196–223). LeVine's theory indeed appears applicable in some ethnographic settings in East Africa (e.g., Goldschmidt 1975), but it has also been shown to be less relevant in other East African contexts.¹⁹ Beng practices of West Africa further suggest that LeVine's hypothesis is not readily transferable to all of sub-Saharan Africa but, rather, must be modified to accommodate local cultural variation. Moreover, LeVine's explanation, based as it is on economic and ecological concerns, may elide variable cultural issues. Thus the Beng are at least as impoverished as are the rural populations with whom LeVine has worked in Kenya, yet cultural factors (specifically, religious ideology) inspire Beng mothers (and other caretakers) to speak directly

to infants no matter what the economic constraints and anxieties.

If, due to their previous life in wrugbe, Beng infants are seen by adults to be capable of understanding language, what of their own verbalizing abilities? In fact, Beng infants' babble is routinely remarked upon, delighted in, and encouraged as protolinguistic, not only by Beng mothers but by siblings, grandparents, other relatives, neighbors, and indeed anyone who observes it. For instance, a mother of a seven-month-old once observed her son looking with interest at two nearby pigs who were grunting. When the pigs quieted, her baby made noises that she interpreted as imitating the animals. She clapped her hands with pleasure and exclaimed, "Ja, e za dō!" 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.

Adults also take an active role in teaching their infants to speak the Beng language by "speaking for" their infants. In this routine, an adult asks a question directly of an infant and another adult (the mother or whoever is currently minding the baby) answers for the child in the first person, as if she were the baby. She is, in effect, "prompting" the baby with "lines" presumably to repeat months later when the infant will be capable of such speech. In one case, an infant of about seven months was seated on a mat on the ground without anyone obviously serving as a caretaker. My husband asked the baby how he was, and no one said anything for a moment. When an unrelated woman in the courtyard (the only adult nearby) realized that no one had answered for the baby, she immediately provided the first-person answer, "nń, n kenè" (Yes, I'm fine), and apologized for not having answered sooner. As this story reveals, adults consider it critical to encourage (as psychologists would say) or to acknowledge (as Beng would say) the active verbalizing abilities of infants.

Neither the encouragement of babies' own babblings nor a high level of speech addressed directly by older people to infants is universal. As some scholars have reported elsewhere, infants' babble may be ignored in some societies, and adults may address their speech only rarely to babies. Both these strategies of downplaying babies' language are well documented for infants in Samoa as well as among the Kaluli of New Guinea (though Samoan adults start speaking to older infants when the latter begin to crawl) (Ochs and Schieffelin 1984). Still, we must acknowledge that the Beng are hardly unique in valuing the babble of infants or in addressing them directly and frequently. To cite just one example that will be familiar to most readers of this journal, both these patterns of encouraging infant speech are very well established among middle-class Western families. My argument is that while the pattern

may be common (though not universal), the local cultural systems that give it meaning are variable. The same behavior may make sense in very different ways, and for very different reasons, in diverse contexts (Geertz 1973b).

On the other hand, the babble of Beng infants is not always rewarded by Beng adults, who train even babies not to interrupt adults' speech, as part of a pattern of children showing deference to their elders. Where adults in other societies may assume that infants are not worthy conversational partners, hence not worth training in this respect (Ochs and Schieffelin 1984), the Beng attitude is quite different. Being equipped to understand language from their prior life in wrugbe, even the youngest infants are seen as eminently trainable in adult norms of politeness. Just to cite one example, my friend Amenan and I were once talking with some neighbors in her courtyard. Nearby, her six-month-old grandson Sassandra sat on a mat on the ground, making what I considered adorable baby noises. But the noises were so cute, and loud, that they proved distracting, and we adults in the courtyard were unable to continue our conversation. Amenan told her young grandson solemnly, "Mi jole twaa!" (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. In ways such as this, Beng adults confirm the linguistic abilities of even the youngest of children. In turn, this practice implicitly affirms the continuing connection of infants to the linguistically complex world of wrugbe from which they have emerged only recently, and partially.

We have seen that Beng adults usually encourage infant babble while insisting that it conform to adult rules of politeness, based on adults' assumption that infants are said to understand any language. Nevertheless, despite this relatively positive and encouraging attitude by Beng adults toward the speech of babies, the verbalizing abilities of infants are said to be problematic. Beng adults assert that, just as they understand the language of others, Beng infants are indeed able to communicate their desires and thoughts. But most adults are incapable of understanding these efforts at communication. 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 nurse. But none of the subtleties of these means of communication is readily understandable to the baby's parents, who emerged from that other life too long ago to remember its language. Thus to have their infant's cries or digestive irregularities translated, a diviner's services 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, the spirits (*bɔŋzɔ*) who speak both the language of the other world 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 to the parents of this life, via crying or digestive irregularities. 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.

The liminal status of infants produces a range of behaviors in mothers and other caretakers that goes a long way toward accounting for how babies are handled. In this case, ideology provides a blueprint, a "model for," behavior (by adults) while praxis creates a "model of" ideology (Geertz 1973a). Moreover, infants themselves are accorded a high level of agency in this indigenous model. Their agency is seen not only as biological but also as intellectual, since they are 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 care challenge dominant Western models of child rearing at the same time that they challenge the anthropologist to take seriously both the domain of religion in understanding infancy and the domain of infancy in understanding religion.

Conclusions

Anthropologists have long promoted the notion that customs assumed by the members of one society to be natural may be surprisingly absent elsewhere and that such customs, seemingly unnatural in the views of outsiders, make sense when viewed in the context of a variety of cultural factors whose meanings can be discerned only after systematic analysis of the local system. Some time ago, Clifford Geertz (1983) articulated this argument with relation to the notion of common sense, arguing that what passes as common sense is anything but common. Instead, it is a deeply culturally constructed artifice that is so convincingly structured as to appear transparent, self-evident. At one level, this essay has taken up this line of thinking, seeking to apply Geertz's insight to the seemingly commonsensical realm of infant care. Indeed, I have interrogated a domain of human practice that, perhaps more than any other, is routinely taken for granted even by anthropologists as somehow having a natural foundation beyond the reaches of culture. Yet as we have seen in exploring the Beng world, the everyday decisions that mothers

and other caretakers make concerning infants are anything but "common" when viewed from an outsider's perspective, while religion, that bastion of adult contemplation worthy of the great philosophers and social theorists, turns out to be critical to, and critically defining of, the lives of the tiniest humans.

In other words, in this article I have tried to show that at least in the Beng case, a nexus exists between two domains of inquiry that anthropologists have long regarded as discrete: the seemingly commonsensical or natural domain of infant care and the seemingly more exalted domain of religion. Perhaps one reason that the two domains of religion and infant care have typically been assumed to inhabit different worlds of scholarly inquiry relates to prefeminist assumptions about the nature of society and its assumed structure of gender roles. Briefly put, most social scientists writing before the current feminist era assumed the domestic world of the household to be the bastion of women's lives. In turn, the lives of women themselves (especially their typically intense involvement with child rearing, most particularly care of infants) were long seen as more natural than cultural and, hence, more private than public.²⁰ Happily, feminism has challenged this easy set of associations, inspiring a generation of scholars to investigate women's lives, including the world that is commonly defined as domestic, as entirely cultural.²¹ Initially directing analysis to women's public lives, feminist anthropologists have more recently begun to see women's seemingly private involvements as nevertheless fully culturally shaped and, moreover, as having a direct impact on public events. In other words, the conceptual boundary between public and private is now being radically challenged, disturbing the definition of our basic categories.²² In keeping with this development, some female anthropologists themselves have begun to see their own lives as both illustrative of and illuminating social processes.²³ Now that women are at last accepted as properly anthropological subjects, it is theoretically possible that women's inevitable involvements with children, including infants, those seemingly humblest of all humans, may be the next source of ethnographic inspiration.

Notes

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to nudge me along in certain directions. I have also been lucky enough to receive exceptionally careful readings and provocative suggestions from Nancy Abelmann, Edward Bruner, Judy DeLoache, and Philip Graham, and five superb reviewers for this journal (Dell Hymes, Philip Kilbride, John McCall, Simon Ottenberg, and Charles Piot), to all of whom I extend my deep thanks. Comments that I have been unable to address here for lack of space will be taken up in the book I am writing on this subject.

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Finally, members of my immediate family continue to inspire me, each in their own ways. Our son Nathaniel's babyhood originally motivated me to think anthropologically about infancy, and our daughter Hannah's toddlerhood now continues this tradition. Sharing fieldwork, our children, and conversations about these with my husband Philip Graham is a continual pleasure.

1. The one exception to this tendency is the study of teenagers (or younger children) in the context of organized initiation rituals. Africanist discussions along these lines are particularly well known. Audrey Richards's (1956) and Victor Turner's (1967) explorations of Chisungu girls' and Ndembu boys' initiations, respectively, set the tone for several generations of future scholars' writings. See, for example, LaFontaine 1985, Ottenberg 1989, and Schloss 1988.

2. A brief but provocative treatment of infants' experiences of religion in general and the afterlife in particular is found in Leis 1982. Far more works investigate the lives of children without concentrating on religious experiences. Other anthropologists mention infancy in passing as part of longer discussions of life-cycle issues, but few have taken infants themselves seriously as a proper subject of extended inquiry, and fewer still have investigated their religious lives (see Gottlieb 1997).

3. E.g., Farnell 1994; Howes 1991; Stoller 1989, 1997.

4. Of course Westerners with active religious affiliations may involve their infants (and older children) in religious activities geared to the life cycle, including baptisms or circumcision rituals and adolescent initiations (e.g., Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1982). Furthermore, members of contemporary Western religious communities, including Amish, Mennonite, and Chasidic Jewish communities, usually promote systematic child-rearing agendas based explicitly on religious doctrines.

Between medical and religious orientations lies the psychological zone. Nancy Abelmann (personal communication, August 1996) has commented that "'our' conception of infancy also includes a needy baby who is (perhaps ineffectively) trying to communicate her needs to a parent who doesn't always quite get it." In this sense, one common Western model would lie somewhere between the two extreme models I have sketched (Beng-spiritual versus biomedical).

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

6. I focus on life in rural Beng villages, with which I am most familiar. Among the very small group of Beng mothers now living in towns and cities, infant care practices seem to vary.

7. The title of this section (which is the working title of the book I am writing on this subject) speaks both respectfully and critically to a posthumous volume of collected 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*.

8. The urban nature of wrugbe implies an "other" world that is truly Other, given the very rural nature of traditional Beng society. Considering the relatively recent (and still partial) engagement of the Beng with the globalized, urban world (Gottlieb 1992:1-8), this presumably recent innovation in the indigenous cosmology is significant, revealing at once a creative effort to incorporate modernity into the framework of tradition and an effort to distance the "other world" as dramatically as possible from this one (see Comaroff and Comaroff 1993; Gottlieb 1992:119-142).

9. See Ardener 1989:117, 123, et passim on "demographic false consciousness" and "folk-demography."

10. John Peel (personal communication, April 14, 1996) has noted that a somewhat similar "contradiction" (by Western standards) exists in Yoruba thought: ancestors are said to inhabit two levels simultaneously, both individual and collective, with no problem perceived concerning what appears to Western logic as internal inconsistency.

11. In one study of infants born vaginally in Seattle, the mean number of days for umbilical cord separation was 12.9 (Novack et al. 1988:221), though the range was 3 to 45 days. The mean appears to be shorter in developing countries (for an explanatory hypothesis, see Novack et al. 1988:222); for example, in a study of infants born vaginally in India, the mean number of days was 5.2 (Bhalla et al. 1975). At the time of my own fieldwork, there weren't enough newborns for me to observe this phenomenon at a statistically significant level.

12. If the stump falls off early enough in the morning, the rituals are conducted soon; otherwise, they are carried out the morning of the next day. Extended symbolic elaboration and/or ritual treatment of the umbilical stump in one way or another is by no means uncommon in West Africa; for a notable example from the Igbo of Nigeria, see Uchendu 1965:58–59.

13. In another chapter in my forthcoming book on this topic, I develop the more pragmatic rationale for this practice from the perspective of the mother and her labor demands.

14. The gradualness of this process has been noted elsewhere in Africa (e.g., for the Ijaw of Nigeria, see Leis 1982:154) and in other world areas such as Indonesia (Edward Bruner, personal communication, August 1996; Diener n.d.). Bruner has also speculated that a gradual process of entry into “this world” may correlate with a gradual process of exiting from it, which in turn correlates with a long and drawn-out set of funeral rituals.

15. The ancient French coins are sometimes sold in local markets, though they are increasingly rare. The tie between infants and cowries is found elsewhere in West Africa, for example, among the Mossi of Burkina Faso, who for a sum of cowrie shells may “sell” a new infant born to a woman who has had many stillbirths or many previous children who died, as a means of protecting the newborn against tragedy (Skinner 1962:274). Charles Piot (personal communication, November 1996) suggests that the Beng custom of adorning babies with cowrie shells implies an emphasis on separation (from the other world) that echoes separations experienced elsewhere in the circulation of cowrie shells, for example, in the market (between persons and their products) and between the living and the dead (in the Voltaic area).

16. Variations on this theme seem to exist elsewhere in Africa. For example, among the Sukuma/Nyamwezi people of Tanzania, people possessed by ancestral spirits often begin inexplicably to speak in the languages of surrounding ethnic groups (especially the Maasai and the Taturu peoples)—languages that neither the possessed themselves nor their Sukuma/Nyamwezi audiences can understand (Roth 1996:204–205). A notion of a multilingual and mutually comprehensible afterlife not unlike that envisioned by the Beng may be at work here.

17. On the striking congruence with a widely accepted scholarly model of early language development, see Werker 1989.

18. E.g., Bavin 1995:379–381; Caudill 1972; Ochs and Schieffelin 1984; Snow et al. 1979.

19. E.g., Kilbride and Kilbride 1983; Super and Harkness 1974.

20. For reasons explaining this double tendency, see Ortner 1974, 1989–90 and Rosaldo 1974, 1980.

21. E.g., Behar and Gordon 1995; Ginsburg and Rapp 1995; Glenn et al. 1994; Rich 1976.

22. E.g., Comaroff 1987; McCormack and Strathern 1980; Rogers 1978.

23. E.g., Abu-Lughod 1995; Behar 1995, 1996; Gottlieb 1995a; Okely and Callaway 1992; Schrijvers 1993.

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