

A World of Babies

Imagined Childcare Guides for Eight Societies

Fully Revised Second Edition

Edited by

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CHAPTER 6

Luring Your Child into this Life of Troubled Times

A Beng Path for Infant Care in Post-Civil War Côte d'Ivoire

Alma Gottlieb

WHO ARE THE BENG?

The Beng are one of the smallest and least known of about sixty ethnic groups in the West African nation of Côte d'Ivoire, or Ivory Coast. With a population of approximately 17,000, they live in some twenty villages located in an ecological border zone between the rainforest to the south and savanna to the north.

The Beng are surrounded by neighbors who speak different languages from theirs (especially Baule, Ando, and Jimini). Their language is one of the group of Southern Mande languages that are spoken far to the west and southwest. Most of their neighbors consider the Beng as the indigenous population in the region. However, their early history is complex and somewhat mysterious. Linguistic evidence suggests the current nation of Mali as a starting point from which the group split off and began a long series of migrations over 2,000 years ago.

The Beng have no memory of the Atlantic slave trade that devastated the continent. Perhaps whenever they felt the threat of slave traders passing nearby, their ancestors managed to elude them by fleeing deep into the forest. As farmers living in relatively

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small villages in or near the rainforest, they certainly knew the forest well, making regular use of its animal and plant resources. They also engaged in long-distance trade in kola nuts, pottery, bark cloth, and other local products, largely with villagers and long-distance Muslim traders from the north; they often used cowry shells as currency in these transactions.

Their first memories of contact with Europeans are quite recent, commencing with the French occupation of the Beng region in the early 1890s. As pacifists, the Beng prayed to their ancestors and the Earth for deliverance from the colonizing force, but they offered no military or political resistance to the French invaders – unlike other nearby groups that actively resisted colonization. Using violence, the French colonizers compelled Beng farmers to build roads and also to devote time to planting new crops (especially coffee, cocoa, and new varieties of rice and cotton) that the Beng were required to sell back to the French to gain cash, which they were then compelled to give back to the French colonizing force as “taxes”; these forcibly extracted revenues helped support the French colonial empire in West Africa for several decades.

The nation of Côte d’Ivoire gained independence from France in 1960. A wealthy Baule plantation owner, Félix Houphouët-Boigny, became the nation’s first president and held that position until his death in 1993. Beng villagers overwhelmingly supported Houphouët throughout his long reign, even though his final years were marked by increasing national debt, corruption, poverty, urban crime, and repression – accompanied by mounting criticism by educated citizens. Scholars began noting signs of upcoming trouble early on, as the president racked up mounting state debt for boondoggle personal projects such as an enormous, air-conditioned, but mostly empty Catholic cathedral in his home village. However, the nation had produced impressive statistics for the global financial sector, and the myth of an “Ivorian miracle” cast a long shadow that obscured the increasing likelihood of economic catastrophe.

When Houphouët died in 1993, he left behind neither clear succession structures nor a clearly appointed heir. The resulting power vacuum allowed bitter political rivalries to foment. The

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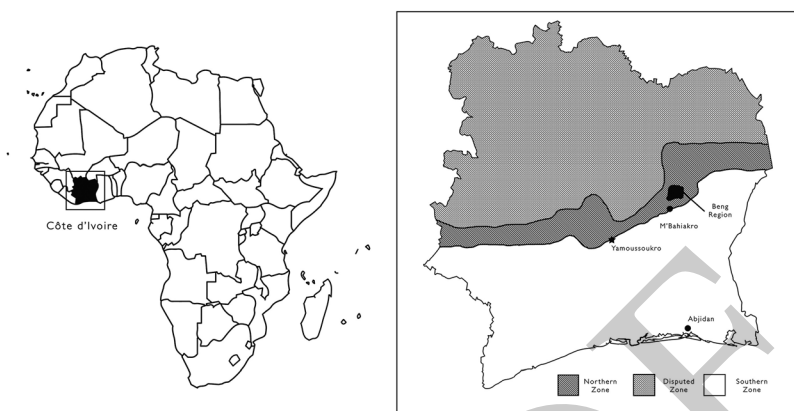


Figure 6.1 In Côte d'Ivoire, the location of their villages – on the border between rainforest to the south and savanna to the north – placed the Beng community in harm's way during the nation's civil war, which pitted north against south.

Map by Billy W. Fore.

country sank into increasingly violent conflict, vigilante justice, and, eventually, intermittent civil war. Beyond a variety of economic and political challenges, the conflict drew from underlying tensions created by the colonial French regime, which had favored development in the (nominally) Christian southern region of fertile rainforest over the (largely) Muslim northern region of more arid savanna. Located along the boundary of the northern and southern regions, Bengland unexpectedly became the site of protracted conflict (see Figure 6.1). Rebels destroyed many houses and farms. As pacifists, the Beng did not become actively involved in the fighting. Instead, many villagers fled the region for the relative safety of nearby towns and cities, while others took refuge in the forest. Now that the war is over, many Beng have made their way back to the villages, where they are endeavoring to rebuild the homes, and lives, they were forced to flee.

Although the nation's conflicts over the past two decades had devastating effects on the Beng, life in the villages had always been changing in many ways. Then and now, everyone works hard for meager material rewards, practicing a mixed economy of

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farming, hunting, and gathering. Men typically work in the fields from about 8 a.m. until 5 p.m., sometimes followed by some light village-based work in the evenings. Women typically work even longer hours because of their full-time work on the farms coupled with their near-exclusive responsibility for cooking, house cleaning, water hauling, wood chopping, and childcare.

Whether or not they attend primary school, children are trained in local farming techniques. Even toddlers of two to three years of age are expected to help in agricultural tasks to the best of their abilities. In precolonial times, some men (and a smaller number of women) also hunted game in the forest. However, the growth of a cash economy, with its labor-intensive farming techniques, has reduced the time available for hunting, and the price of bullets and trapping line is too high for many would-be hunters. As a result, the amount of animal protein eaten has declined in recent years. Women, men, and children continue to collect edible wild plants (especially berries and leaves), as well as a variety of small forest creatures such as snails.

Despite extensive Western rhetoric about promoting “development in the Third World,” as with many other peasant populations of Africa the Beng became progressively impoverished under both the French colonial regime and the postcolonial governments. In the 1990s, some Beng families had reverted to a virtual subsistence economy. Following the ending of national conflict, government rebuilding of infrastructure has been slow, and democratic structure remains fragile. The weakness of the state makes the nation vulnerable to a range of troubling effects, from toxic waste dumping by irresponsible multinational corporations to problematic moral codes of youth. Religious and ethnic xenophobia have been stoked since Houphouët’s death, exacerbated by Othering processes (especially directed toward Muslim immigrants from the nation’s northern neighbor of Burkina Faso) that became institutionalized during the period of political conflict. This stigmatization of the nation’s Muslim residents is leaving it vulnerable to religious extremism and human rights abuses.

As elsewhere, the declining economy and weak infrastructure have profound implications for children’s lives. Some Beng

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parents cannot afford childhood inoculations, and the relatively new health post in the Beng region is often closed for lack of personnel, and bereft of medicines when it is open. Many parents who would like to send their children to school cannot afford the expenses for uniforms and school supplies that the nominally free school system requires. The nearest junior high school remains outside the Beng region, requiring uprooting of children from their families to attend, and the nearest high school is even farther, requiring creative strategies to find appropriate housing.

Beng villages are grouped into two internal political divisions, each of which is ruled by a king-and-queen pair (who are considered to be sister and brother). A local court system has an appeals structure built into it; only rarely do people resort to the highest level of appeal – the national government.

The schools are modeled on the French educational system, with all instruction conducted in the country's official language of French. Although elementary school is compulsory for six years, many Beng parents do not comply with this law, in part because of distrust of anything related to the French colonial regime and its aftermath. Until the 1970s, some parents who were forced to send their children to school even prayed to local spirits that their sons and daughters fail their exams so they could leave school.

Currently, more young people are rejecting the conservatism of their elders, and more young parents are complying with national law and sending their children to elementary school for at least a few years. Still, the failure and dropout rates of Beng students, even at the elementary school level, has been quite high. For example, in 1993 in one Beng village's elementary school, eleven out of thirty-nine first grade students failed, and only thirteen out of thirty-six students in the last grade passed an eligibility test to attend junior high school. As of this writing, only one Beng person has achieved a doctoral degree (in political science).

Beng families are usually large. In the villages, birth control efforts are generally limited to a taboo on sex until a baby can walk independently. Although there are many variations,

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extended families typically consist of a husband and wife (or wives), all their unmarried daughters, all their sons, and their married sons' wives and children. Until the 1960s, extended families generally lived together under the thatched roof of a single large, round house. In the 1960s, the government, citing risk of fire, bulldozed these houses and required smaller, square houses with tin roofs for all new buildings meant for sleeping. Nevertheless, extended families still manage to live near one another, with family subgroups often inhabiting small buildings surrounding an open courtyard.

A double system of clans crosscuts the family structure, with each individual belonging simultaneously to two clans – one whose membership is traced exclusively in the female line (matrilans) and another whose membership is traced exclusively in the male line (patrilans). At marriage, neither men nor women change their membership in either of these clans. Until recently, virtually all first marriages of young women were arranged by their families, according to a complex system determined by birth order. This system is still actively maintained, although some women have begun rebelling against it.

Until the 1960s, most Beng devoutly practiced an indigenous religion. In the past few decades, more people have become attracted to Islam, and some have endorsed Christianity (both Catholicism and Protestantism). A mosque now exists in one village, and most other villages have at least a significant minority of Muslim Beng (as well as immigrant Muslims of other ethnic groups, especially Julas). However, like many West Africans, most Beng who have endorsed one of the “world” religions continue to practice at least some components of their traditional religion; only a few have completely converted.

The indigenous religion requires people to offer regular prayers and sacrifices to the sky/god (*eci*), ancestors, a variety of bush spirits, and other spirits affiliated directly with the Earth. Indigenous religious practitioners are primarily of two sorts – diviners and Earth priests. Diviners, who may be either male or female, use a variety of techniques to communicate with invisible spirits of the bush and of ancestors; they then interpret the

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spirits' communications to their clients. One of the commonest reasons for villagers to consult diviners is to discover the cause and/or cure for a child's illnesses. Mothers of sick children frequently consult a secular herbalist first; if the child's symptoms remain after she has carried out the herbalist's orders, the mother then consults a diviner.

Often, the divination indicates that a sacrifice to the Earth is necessary. In this case, the client then consults an Earth priest. These priests, who are almost always male, worship the Earth spirits once every six days (according to the traditional six-day Beng calendar). They offer prayers, as well as sacrifices of palm wine, kola nuts, eggs, and domestic animals, on behalf of people who seek protection against witchcraft, relief from afflictions deemed to have a spiritual cause, or atonement for past sins. They also offer sacrifices on behalf of those who want to give thanks for wishes granted or good fortune experienced.

A divination may reveal that a given illness is being caused by ancestors who feel neglected by their living descendants, who may not be making the desired offerings. As elsewhere in Africa, Beng ancestors are incorporated into daily life. Most adult men and some adult women pray and make offerings (especially palm wine) to their ancestors regularly. For example, before drinking palm wine, beer, or commercial wine, people always spill a few drops onto the ground for their ancestors. Male and female heads of clans also make regular offerings to the clan's ancestors on behalf of the entire clan.

Once people die, their souls, or *nining*, are said to become *wɛru*, or spirits, that travel to *wɛrugbe*, the land of the dead. As ancestral spirits, the *wɛru* lead full lives parallel to the daily lives of those on earth. Eventually the ancestors are reincarnated into this life. All newborns are seen as having just emerged from *wɛrugbe*; sometimes their ancestral identities are revealed early in childhood.

The "manual" that follows is based on typical Beng village infant care practices. Some Beng mothers now living in towns and cities in Côte d'Ivoire try to replicate these practices in an urban setting. Other Beng women living in town return to their village when they are pregnant, or soon after delivering. Still others have

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begun to modify or even abandon the infant care practices of their grandmothers in favor of those deemed “modern.”

Like people in any society, individual Beng villagers offer a variety of perspectives on childrearing. The manual that follows highlights two perspectives that are particularly important: that of grandmothers, who offer pragmatic/secular advice based on their years of childrearing and its exhausting labor demands; and that of diviners, who offer herbal cures as well as what might be called “pastoral counseling,” based on their communication with the invisible spirits that populate Beng consciousness. The grandmother’s voice is a composite of dozens of Beng grandmothers I have known, while the diviner’s voice is a composite of three Beng diviners I have known. However, the distinction between the two voices I present below is not absolute. Diviners may themselves be grandmothers or mothers and offer pragmatic advice on occasion as well. Moreover, like all Beng adults, grandmothers are acutely aware of the spiritual aspects of infancy, even if they do not articulate the subtleties of this awareness as regularly and clearly as diviners do. It is a matter of emphasis rather than of knowledge. Indeed, for Beng villagers, the religious and the mundane are not easily distinguished. The infant care practices that follow illustrate that general principle.

LURING YOUR CHILD INTO THIS LIFE OF TROUBLED TIMES: A BENG PATH FOR INFANT CARE IN POST-CIVIL WAR CÔTE D’IVOIRE

About the Authors

A GRANDMOTHER

I’ve lived a long time. My white hair shows I’ve seen more than two days, and my children have had children; my grandson’s wife is pregnant with my first great-grandchild. I’ve taken a belly nine times, nursed and bathed nine babies, painted nine babies’

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faces, carried nine babies on my back, made jewelry for nine babies, and kept nine babies from walking too early – and that doesn't include all the grandchildren, nieces, nephews, and neighbors' babies I have also cared for. Only two of my little ones died during their first year; the other seven have survived.

Not all elders become wise – some merely become more foolish as they grow older. May our sky/god, *eci*, let me have learned something I can show you before I join the ancestors. Since I never attended school, I don't know paper; I've told what I know to one of my granddaughters who has gone to school, and she's written down my words. Through her, I'll show you how to raise your child.

A MALE DIVINER

Everyone needs diviners. Most villages have at least one; even animals have the porcupine who wags its tail to answer their questions. We diviners reveal the other world to people of this world.

When I was born, our sky/god, *eci*, gave me the gift of speaking with the spirits. At three, I was already reading cowry shells – the spirits spoke to me through them. Even now, I am still young. My wife and I have only two children – but people often walk from faraway villages to ask me to show them who or what has harmed them and what they must do to cure their illnesses.

I went to school, but as for books, the rainwater didn't seep into my house – I didn't learn much because I had to leave after three years to help my father in the fields. So I've told my words to a schoolboy who's written them down. May *eci* let him know well the ways of paper.

SHOWING YOU THE BENG WAY

Since two of us are talking, we may sometimes show you different things to do. If you follow one of our recommendations and it

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doesn't help, try the suggestion that the other one offers. Better yet, do everything we both show you, and you won't go wrong.

In our villages, girls and women usually take care of babies, so we've addressed this manual to you. Still, we know that some boys and men like caring for babies. There's no shame in this – you, too, can learn much from these pages.

If you are a Beng woman and were raised in a Beng village, you don't need this paper, for all your mothers – your own mother and her sisters, and indeed all the village's women – will be your teachers. But because of the war, many young Beng women nowadays were born or raised in the city, while their parents were fleeing the rebels occupying our villages. After growing up in towns and cities, some Beng youth have found someone to marry who is not Beng. If you are such a woman who is, perhaps, Baule or Jula and has married a Beng man, this manual will be especially useful to you. You will learn how your Beng husband's sisters are raising their children, and what your Beng mother-in-law will expect you to do in raising her grandchild.

A more difficult subject to speak about concerns the rebels who occupied our villages. We know that some of them raped our women. Since we do not do anything to prevent becoming pregnant, some of our women took a belly from these men. If you are a Beng woman, perhaps this happened to one of your older sisters or cousins. She may have told you how traumatic her path to motherhood has been, and this may scare you. But remember, those dark days are over. Even if your family has forced you to marry a boy you didn't choose, you will grow closer to your husband as you become parents together, and the love you both feel for the child you lure to this world will help you develop new love for one another.

Wherever you live, and whoever the father of your child, it's important to preserve our ways. After all, if your husband is Beng, you'll want to please him and his family. If you're Beng, you'll join our ancestors in *wrugbe* when you die; after staying there some time, you'll be reborn – perhaps into one of the villages. Besides, you know well how few Beng there are. If our children don't carry on our customs, our ways will vanish.

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TAKING A BELLY

A Grandmother's Words

If yours was an arranged marriage, you already know that your first duty is to “take a belly” as soon as possible. At your wedding, people undoubtedly blessed you, “May *eci* make it right!” You probably realized that this meant you should have many children. If you married your husband in a love match, you probably won’t feel in quite such a rush to take a belly just to please your families, but you will probably want a child soon for your own reasons. If a few moons go by and you don’t see signs of pregnancy, it may be because you’re too hot. Try drinking some “raw medicine.” Pound together some leaves, add some crumbly white clay to it, and drink the mixture cold. You can ask a healer to recommend good plants for this purpose.

Once you become pregnant, you must observe many precautions. You should keep your breasts covered when you walk around the village. If they’re exposed, a jealous woman might bewitch you and make your childbirth difficult. And your hair must remain on your head – if you were to shave it off, as we do in mourning, you’d die during childbirth.

As your belly swells, the skin becomes tight. If you can afford it, buy some shea butter in the market (or make it from kernels of the shea tree’s fruits), and rub it on your belly to keep the skin nicely stretched. Don’t wear tight shirts, or your baby won’t breathe properly.

Be careful not to eat *fufu* from large bananas, or your baby will get too fat. Avoid eating meat from the bushbuck antelope with striped lines, or your baby will have striped or patchy skin. Don’t eat purée of boiled yams or leftover foods; if you do, your labor will be difficult, and you’ll defecate during childbirth – a great embarrassment! Don’t drink palm wine during the first few months, or your pregnancy will be totally ruined.

While you’re pregnant, you should give yourself special enemas every day. If you make an enema using the slippery and shiny leaves of the *voæló* vine, your placenta will become slippery, too, and will slide out quickly after the birth. If you don’t

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know this plant, ask your mother or mother-in-law to show it to you in the forest; if you're living in a city, ask a village relative to send it to you.

If you're living in the village, you must bear in mind another risk. Never eat food while walking along the paths to your fields. Should you forget this, a forest snake may eat the crumbs that fall on the path and will develop a longing for human food. To continue feasting on our delicacies, the snake will switch places with the fetus inside you, and you'll give birth to a snake-child. At first the baby may appear human, but as the diviner will explain, its true character will one day be exposed. May *eci* let you escape from this misfortune! If you're living in town, you won't need to worry about this danger.

Whether in town or country, be careful to stay far away from corpses of people and of dogs – both kinds are dangerous to the baby inside you. If you touched such a corpse, your baby would be born with the disease “Dog” or “Corpse.” Just in case you might touch a corpse by mistake, bathe regularly with a decoction of leaves from the *wéé* plant – this should protect against the disease catching your fetus. (Even after birth, your baby will remain vulnerable. If you bring your little one to a funeral, make sure to stay far from the corpse, or it might entice your baby back to *wérugbe*.) Still, if another pregnant woman dies from witchcraft while you're pregnant, you must join in her funeral. The funeral dance in which you must participate would be held outside in the courtyard of the woman who died, but it's really a secret women's dance. The women who dance wear nothing but the old-style bark cloth underwear, and no men or boys may watch.

But enough of such sad affairs. May *eci* grant that you never hear any rotten news! Let us turn to another subject.

After you've taken a belly, your actions will determine your baby's character. You must try very hard to be good so your child will have a good character, too. If you steal something while you are pregnant, your child will develop the long arm of a thief; if you bewitch someone, your baby will become a witch. Don't set hunting traps – pregnancy is a time to nurture life, not take it. Try not to offend others. If someone is so angry that they invoke

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the Earth to curse you, your pregnancy is in jeopardy. You must immediately sacrifice an animal to the Earth to apologize; otherwise you'll have grave difficulties during the delivery – truly!

Once you take a belly, you shouldn't return to an old boyfriend or take a new lover. If you do, you may suffer a miscarriage, and your lover would suffer for the next seven years. For his part, your husband must observe certain precautions. He should stop hunting, especially at night when it's difficult to see well, because he might kill a female animal that is pregnant. If that should happen, both you and the baby inside your belly would die! Even though people and animals are separated into the two worlds of village and forest, they remain connected; occasionally, they can even switch places. What happens to forest animals can affect what happens to you and the baby inside your belly.

You can continue to have sex with your husband throughout your pregnancy. Any position is fine as long as it's comfortable. Toward the end of your pregnancy, side-by-side will probably be the only position possible. If you prefer not to make love, your husband shouldn't insist. Of course, your husband may be off working in a city, or on one of those cocoa plantations down south, and the pleasures of his company may not even be an option for you.

If you and your husband argue and he threatens divorce, your family should tell him that whether it's good for him or it ruins him, he should remain with you until after the child is born – otherwise you'd have a very difficult time during childbirth. For that matter, if you die during the birth, it's your husband who must offer sacrifices – and if he's divorced you, who would present the offerings?

Giving birth is dangerous. In the old days, our ancestors had strong medicines to protect us against witchcraft, and we old people say it was rare for a woman to die while trying to give birth. Nowadays, even though they say it's the time of modernity, there are more witches who may threaten your pregnancy. If you're living in a village or small town and are afraid that someone may bewitch you during your delivery, earn or borrow some money so that before your eighth month you can take a bus

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to Bouaké or Abidjan to give birth in a doctor's room. May *eci* grant that you reach there safely! It'll be difficult for the witches to find you so far away.

A Diviner's Words

If you're having trouble taking a belly, consult a diviner. If the seer throws cowry shells on a mat, one may land on top of another – a sign that you'll become pregnant and will carry the baby on your back, just as one cowry shell is carrying another on its back. Two shells landing apart from the rest means you'll become pregnant with twins. If the two cowries apart from the rest are stuck to one another, it signifies that there must be twins living in your family who've disrupted your menstrual cycle. All twins are witches, so you must offer the twins a sacrifice to ask their forgiveness. If they accept it, you'll become pregnant.

Once you take a belly, before the seventh month of your pregnancy make sure that your husband sacrifices an egg to the Earth of your village. After receiving the sacrifice, the Earth will protect you and your baby through the rest of the pregnancy, and the delivery.

WHEN YOUR BELLY STARTS TO HURT

A Grandmother's Words

When your belly starts to hurt, your baby wants to be born. May *eci* let it be good for you! Since we still don't have a maternity clinic in any of our villages, you'll probably give birth in your hut just like your mothers and grandmothers did before you. Tell someone in your compound your belly's hurting, and some women in your husband's or your family will come to help. Sit on the floor with your legs outstretched, and one of your companions – preferably someone who's strong and not too old – will support you as you lean back. For your first birth, it's normal for you to be afraid; trust the older women in the room to tell you what to do.

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Once the baby has been born, one of the women will cut the umbilical cord with a razor blade. Try to find a new one to use, as the nurses tell us that an old razor can cause “the serious disease” I will tell you about soon. Still, if a witch is determined to kill your child, she will do all she can to find other means.

Once the placenta’s out, someone will announce the news around the village. At least one person from every household will soon be at your door. If you live in a large village, the line of well-wishers may be long! One by one, they’ll bless you and ask, “What have you given me?” You can just reply, “A girl” or “A boy,” and they’ll thank you. That way, everyone in the village will feel that they’re part of your baby’s life, and your newborn will feel welcome to the village.

A Diviner’s Words

If you’re having trouble giving birth, may *eci* get you out of it! We diviners know some good herbal remedies. For instance, you should deliver soon after someone rubs the leaves of two particular plants between the palms of her hands and squeezes some of the water onto your head and some into your mouth, and then rubs the rest onto your belly.

If you’re still having trouble after such treatments, one of your or your husband’s relatives should consult a diviner. We may diagnose that either you or a member of your mother’s clan has sinned against the Earth. In this case, we’ll instruct someone in your family to make an offering, usually a chicken, to the Earth right away, to apologize. Then the birth should proceed without problem. Or, we may hear from the spirits that the baby inside you isn’t joining this world because no one’s calling the baby by the right name – the name the baby wants. One woman I know was having a very difficult childbirth. The diviner said that spirits had named the baby *Mo Jaa*, and she was waiting to hear her name before coming out. When the women in the room called, “*Mo Jaa*, come out quickly!” the baby was born right away.

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BEFORE THE UMBILICAL CORD STUMP FALLS OFF

A Grandmother's Words

Soon after the birth, if the breast water that will sustain your baby over the next year hasn't yet poured out, ask female elders of your village for leaves to lay on your breasts to make the water come in. If your breasts are also swollen, witchcraft is the cause. Some healers know other leaves you can heat and apply to your breasts, to reduce the swelling.

Meanwhile, start doing *kami* right away. When the baby cries, before offering your breast, get a cupful of cool water from your large ceramic water jar. Cradle the baby in your arms, tilt the head back a little, and give a small palmful of the water. If your little one refuses the water, go ahead and force it down the throat. You must teach your baby to like the taste of water. That way, when you can't be together – say, you're chopping trees for firewood, or collecting water from the well – someone else can satisfy your hungry child with plain water until you return with breastwater. You know how much work we women have to do, and we can't always take our babies along. If you don't train your baby to do *kami*, your life will be difficult!

A Diviner's Words

Right after the birth, the baby needs a very thorough bath. In the old days, the female head of your mother's clan would have washed your baby in a large wooden bowl; nowadays your mother might bathe the baby in an enamel basin sold in the market. Remember that your new child has just been living in *wrugbe* with our ancestors, so your mother must wash off as much of *wrugbe* as possible. For the first bath, she should use home-made black soap – the kind we use for washing corpses. This makes sense, since newborns and the newly dead are both moving from one world to the next. (In future baths, you can use the white soap sold in the market.)

Following the first bath, your mother will wash out your baby's mouth with lemon juice; she may also attach a whole lemon to

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a cotton cord and tie this around your infant's tiny wrist as a bracelet. These, too, will help chase away death and protect your baby from witches. The lemon is a powerful tree, helping us move from one world to the other and keeping us from the other world when it is not yet our time to go. (At a funeral, people also wear lemon bracelets to protect against witchcraft and death, and they wash corpses with leaves from the lemon tree.)

Your mother will bathe your baby four times a day until the umbilical cord stump falls off, which usually happens by the third or fourth day. To dry out the stump quickly, one of your mothers or grandmothers will dab a tiny bit of an herbal mixture on the dangling cord every few minutes all day long and even through the night. This is a tiresome task, but it's too important to neglect! Until the umbilical cord stump falls off, your newborn hasn't yet begun to become a person. The tiny creature is still living completely as a *wru* in the other world. If your newborn stops breathing during those first few days, we won't hold a funeral; having never left *wrugbe* at all, the baby hasn't really died.

WHEN THE UMBILICAL CORD STUMP FALLS OFF

A Grandmother's Words

The day that your baby's umbilical stump falls off, you and some female relatives will gather in your dark bedroom and give the baby the first enema. For your first child, your mother will teach you how to crush the leaves of the *kprawkpraw* plant together with a single chili pepper and some warm water, and then put the mixture inside a bulb-shaped gourd that we women grow for this purpose. With the little one lying across your knees, and a basin below, insert the gourd into your baby's bottom hole. You will hear some loud screams, for it's like breaking the hymen the first time a girl has sex. You remember how that hurt, don't you? Still, you'll feel proud that you're starting to introduce your baby into this life, since we give ourselves enemas regularly all our lives. Indeed, from now until the baby walks, you *must* administer such

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an enema every morning and every night (though you can use a rubber bulb syringe sold in the market, rather than the old-fashioned gourd). Usually the baby will shit into the basin as soon as you've removed the gourd.

A few hours after the first enema, your mother (or another older woman) will make the baby a simple necklace from savanna grass or the bark of a pineapple tree. After she puts the necklace around the baby, your mother may bless it by saying, "May *eci* let it never rip." Your baby will wear this necklace night and day. Only after this cord is attached can your little one begin to wear jewelry with beads, shells, and other ornaments. If your baby is a girl, a female elder can pierce her tiny ears that very day, leaving a black cotton thread in the hole until it sets and your baby can then have real earrings.

A Diviner's Words

The day that a baby's umbilical cord stump falls off is important, truly! It shows that your newborn has begun to leave *wrugbe*. As soon as the stump has dropped off, rub *nunu pléplé* leaves onto the spot. Along with lemon trees, the leaves from this plant are used at funerals, where they chase away the smell – and contagion – of death. On your baby's belly button, the leaves will help your baby leave the death of *wrugbe* behind. Still, you should know that this is a long, slow process that takes your child a few years to complete. One day you'll know that your older children have left *wrugbe* forever when they tell you or your husband about a dream they had, saying that it was only a dream. But that may not happen until your child is older, maybe even six or seven years old.

Until then, your baby will miss certain things from the other life. You should consult a diviner as soon as possible to find out what these are! Our fees aren't high – rarely more than fifty CFAs. This is far less than the price of a bus that you will pay going to the city clinic if your baby gets very sick because you did not consult a diviner!

We diviners have several methods. Some swirl milky-white water in a bowl; others dance. Me, I throw cowry shells on a bark

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cloth mat. Once I water my cowries, the spirits of the bush and the ancestors are drawn to the shells. Since your baby was just living in the other life, your little one can speak to these spirits, which also inhabit *wrugbe*. As I throw the cowries onto my mat, the spirits arrange the shells to speak for your baby, and I read their secrets from the patterns.

Usually we tell you to give a cowry to your baby as a first gift. This is because long, long ago the cowry was money for our ancestors; it's still money in the other life, so the spirits of our ancestors all like them. Remember, your newborn was just living among the ancestors a few days ago, and a shell will remind your baby of that life in *wrugbe*. You can string the shell onto cotton thread that the baby can wear as a bracelet.

YOUR BABY'S NAME

A Grandmother's Words

No matter what your child is named, the baby's grandparents may want to be present for the naming. In the old days we named our babies for spirits in the rivers, hills, and other places. Nowadays, few parents do this. Depending on the day the baby was born, most parents just use the day names we've borrowed from our Baule neighbors. For example, if your daughter is born on a Tuesday, her name will be Ajua (for a boy, Kouadio). Keep in mind that our day ends at sundown, so if your baby is born after dusk, you must use the name of the day beginning that evening. If your daughter (or son) is born the same weekday that an older sister (or brother) was born, add *kro*, or "little," to the baby's day name, and *kala*, or "big," to your older child's name. That way, they won't both come when you call!

Each of the day names has a somewhat secret name – a "name underneath" – that goes with it. You'll find good occasion to use this name with your child – for instance, if you're angry at your child for being naughty, or if you want to calm down your child from being upset. But remember that even though the baby's "name underneath" is shared with all the other people

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who have that day name, we try to keep these names hidden. Only say it aloud to your child in your own compound, or it won't remain concealed for long! I won't divulge the names here – find out your baby's own "name underneath" from an older relative.

In addition to the day names, if you have twins, a girl will also be named Kolu or Klingo; a boy, Sã or Zi. If you have three daughters or three sons in a row, the third will be named Nguessan; if your next child is another daughter (or another son), the name will be Ndri. If you have the misfortune to have two babies die one right after another, the third child born after those two will be called Wamyã (for a boy) or Sunu (for a girl). With all these names, wherever your children go in our world, people will know something about them.

In addition to our Black people's names, some parents choose to give French names to their children. In truth, I don't know what these White people's names mean or where they come from, so I can't say more about them. The teachers seem to prefer calling our children by these names in school. I suppose these names' time has come.

A Diviner's Words

If your baby is born the very same day that a grandparent dies, the little one should be named after that grandparent. Or your baby may be given the same name as a grandparent who is already in *wrugbe*. In both cases, your baby is a replacement of his or her grandparent, and many people will call the child Grandma or Grandpa.

Nowadays our naming system is not good. Many of our parents just assign day names without imagining who the baby was in *wrugbe*. This is not realistic! Everyone had another identity in the other life, and many babies prefer us to acknowledge that. Other babies are gifts of spirits and should be named after them, or the spirits will become angry. As I'll explain, if you have chosen the wrong name, your baby may become very sick.

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PROTECTING YOUR BABY AGAINST SICKNESS

A Grandmother's Words

As a mother, it's your responsibility to keep your baby healthy and find appropriate medicines for sicknesses. Should you neglect this, your husband may criticize you. If you're still living in your parents' house, your husband may hold a private family trial requesting that you return to his home so he can make sure you are giving the baby proper treatments.

We have many ways to protect our babies from falling ill. An important one is a long bathing routine. Once the umbilical cord has fallen off, you *must* bathe your baby twice a day – every day – until the child walks. Otherwise, the little one will come down with the very serious disease we call Dirt, which causes a bad Dirt Cough. This disease doesn't come from the ordinary dirt that sticks to the skin when your baby lies or crawls on the ground; no, it comes from another form of dirt that we can't see but that's much more dangerous. This is the dirt that comes from being held – or even touched briefly – by a man or woman who hasn't bathed in the morning after having had sex the night before. All grown people know that we must *always* bathe every morning so that if we had sex the night before, we won't bring the sickness of Dirt to babies we might touch that day. Shame on the person who forgets! Even after your baby is no longer vulnerable to this kind of dirt, keep the child accustomed to bathing twice every day so that, as an adult, your son or daughter will never forget to bathe the morning after having sex.

The next most important way to keep your baby healthy is to put many strands of jewelry onto the little one. Perhaps you have thought that all the necklaces, bracelets, and anklets that our babies wear are just to make them look beautiful. Some of our men think this! In truth, only a few of the necklaces and waist bands are meant just to embellish our babies; most are to protect them from diseases. I'll tell you about some items of jewelry, but keep in mind that we have too many types for me to list them all here.

Your mothers and grandmothers may give you some beads and shells, and you can also buy beads in the market – though

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Figure 6.2 This Beng baby is wearing colonial-era French coins on his necklace to remind him of the afterlife he is said to miss.
Photograph by Alma Gottlieb.

some are hard to find, and expensive. Still, your baby should wear as many strands as possible – the more jewelry, the better protected against disease (see Figure 6.2). For example, you can guard against Dirt by keeping a Dirt Cord on your baby, made with some of your own hair, or from pineapple tree bark and some beads and knots. Don't worry that your baby might strangle from the necklaces – remember that the cords protect your baby so they can't possibly cause harm.

Another danger to your baby's health is Full Moon. If a baby is caught by the bright light of a full moon, the little one's stomach

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will become quite round and swollen – like the full moon. At another time of the month, the disease Bird can catch your little one if a rotten bird (such as an owl or a vulture) flies overhead on the night of a new moon. This is even more serious – your child’s neck may break and bend backwards, the body become cold, the elbows stiff, and the eyes white.

You may wonder why the new moon and the full moon – the beginning and end of the moon’s cycle – are dangerous to babies. Perhaps it’s because babies occupy the beginning and end of our own cycle – the beginning of their stay in this life, and the end of their stay in *wrugbe*. Fortunately, a waist band can protect your baby against both Bird (from the new moon) and Full Moon. Make it by tying together a black cord (like the black of a new moon night) and a white cord (like the light of a full moon).

Danger is also associated with daily cycles. One form of fever that can kill your baby quickly is caused by touching dew, which is too powerful for babies. Dew, of course, appears at the beginning and end of the day (before dawn and after dusk) – a bit like babies themselves, who also occupy the beginning and end of our life’s cycle. If you put a cotton Dew Cord around your little one’s knees or ankles, and maybe running up the shins, the child will be well protected from dew touching a leg on the way to the fields in early morning or late evening.

All the jewelry I’ve described must be as clean as your baby’s body. Every morning and evening, after you wash your baby’s skin, carefully clean each strand with soap, then squeeze the moisture out with a towel. By this time your baby might be very hungry from not having nursed for a while and may start to cry or pull on your breast. But don’t rush washing the jewelry – it must be done properly! As you scrub the jewelry, inspect each strand – if it’s frayed, repair it right away, otherwise the beads may fall off and your baby, no longer protected, could fall sick. One of your mothers can show you how to retie the complicated knots.

You can also protect your baby by painting brightly colored medicines onto the face and head. Many babies have an orange dot on their fontanel, which is the end point of a “head road”

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that runs down to the throat. If the path becomes blocked, the throat will close, the baby won't be able to nurse or eat well, and the little one may develop a fever or cough. Keep your baby's head road open by painting an orange dot on the fontanel during every morning and evening bath. Make the orange paint by chewing a red kola nut, then spitting out your saliva – which will be bright orange – onto your finger. (The kola is a powerful fruit – in the old days it was trading kola nuts that gave us our wealth.) Keep applying this orange kola water twice every day until your child starts to walk. At this time, the head road will close up and your little one will no longer be at risk.

In addition to these ways we have for keeping our babies healthy, White people have some useful customs, too. If you're lucky enough to find the health post open when you go to the one in our village, you might get some good White people's medicines or advice if the nurse is on duty. In addition, every so often, vans of nurses show up in our villages to inject us with medicines. My schoolgirl granddaughter tells me that if a woman gets one of those shots, any baby in her belly will be protected against the "difficult disease" that the White people call "tetanus." But, truly, it takes a lot of courage to line up with your children for the shots. The nurses shout orders in French, and who can understand them? Besides, you have to pay for the needle, and if you don't have a medical record notebook, you'll need to buy one from the nurses. You'd better start saving now!

A Diviner's Words

There's another thing you can do to keep your baby healthy. If your husband offered an egg to the Earth while you were pregnant, this has created a debt. Soon after the baby is born, you or your husband should offer another sacrifice to the Earth. This time, it must be a chicken – as thanks for having protected the baby while still inside your belly. With this second sacrifice, the Earth will continue to watch over your baby.

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WHEN YOUR BABY GETS CAUGHT BY SICKNESS

A Grandmother's Words

May *eci* let your baby be healthy! Alas, our babies fall sick quite often. The nurses say it's because of our water and all the insects around us. But we know that a witch will find ways to cause someone harm no matter how clean the water or how few the insects.

If your baby falls sick, go see a healer. Our healers know many health-giving plants that can cure illnesses. Even the poorest among us can pay a healer. Of course, if the healer is a relative, you won't have to pay anything.

If your baby's body is hot, one of your mothers can tell you about plants that can bring down the fever. After bathing your baby, lay some leaves on the embers of your hearth fire to wilt them. After a few moments, rub them between your hands to squeeze out their water, then pat the leaf water over your baby's warm body.

If a carrier of the contagious disease *Dirt* touches your baby, soap will never wash it off. Instead, try bathing your baby with leaves from the *vwolo* liana, which are quite slippery – maybe the disease will slide off the baby. The disease itself is so powerful that you should bathe your baby five or six times a day with the leaf wash. Collect a fresh bunch of leaves in the forest for each bath. While your baby is sick with *Dirt*, this disease will keep you very busy! Try to find someone to weed or sow your fields, chop wood, and haul water for you, so your work isn't neglected.

Another dangerous sickness you can treat with medicinal plants is *Corpse*. Leaves that touched death can cure your baby if the little one has touched a dead body. If your baby son is caught by *Corpse*, go to any woman or girl's grave and take some leaves of any plant growing on top. If your baby daughter is sick, have your husband do the same with the grave of any man or boy. Then make a leaf wash to cure your baby.

Some time during the first two to three weeks, your newborn may start crying very loudly. If the screams continue and become

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sharper, the little one's tiny arms and legs get stiff, the back arches, and the baby seems truly miserable, this may be the "difficult disease" – the one White people call "tetanus."

Unfortunately, there is little hope. If you're rich, you can take your baby to the hospital, but the medicines you'll have to buy may cost more money than you've ever seen. You'll probably need to borrow money from a lot of relatives for the medicines. If the health center they built in one of our villages isn't open, or there's no nurse there, you'll need to borrow more money for a bus trip to town for yourself and one of your mothers, or your husband. Then, the doctor will tell you to stay nearby for a few days to make sure the baby is better before returning home, so you'll have to buy a lot of expensive food in the market. You may also be humiliated by a nurse showing off by speaking French, even if you clearly don't understand a word. If he makes fun of village remedies like the jewelry protecting your baby, ignore it and ask for his medicines. The worst part is that after you endure humiliation and spend maybe a year's earnings, the doctor will tell you that, at best, only half the babies he treats with his medicines survive the "difficult disease." *Aiie*, perhaps, after all, it's better for you to save your money to feed and clothe the rest of your family.

Aside from all I've said so far, there may be days when your baby will cry for no obvious reason. It may be that she's not sleeping enough. You know that babies like to fall asleep on someone's back. If you have some work to do in your faraway fields way deep in the forest (or in another section of town, if you live in a city), tie your baby onto your back with your *pagne* cloth and start walking – your baby will sleep well on your back as you walk.

If, despite all your efforts, your baby keeps crying, it's time to consult a diviner.

A Diviner's Words

Remember, babies have just come from the land of the dead, where they were someone else. The younger your baby, the more the little one is still living and thinking with our ancestors,

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especially the baby's *wrugbe* parents. If *eci* agrees, your baby will leave *wrugbe* behind some day. But this won't happen right away, for babies still hear the language of the other world, and it calls to them. Your little one may miss *wrugbe* and be eager to return. Falling sick or crying is a way to tell you something – the baby is missing, who the baby was in *wrugbe* – but like most adults, you probably can't understand. When you consult a diviner, your baby will speak to the spirits of the bush and of *wrugbe*; the spirits will then speak to the diviner, who will interpret their words for you.

The diviner may hear from the spirits that the little one is unhappy with the name you've chosen and prefers another one – perhaps the name the baby had while in *wrugbe*, or the name of the spirit who gave you your baby. Offer gifts to these spirits every so often to keep them happy, or they'll make your baby sick again. For instance, if your baby was given to you by the *Anie* spirits that live in one of our sacred pools of water, put some fresh water into a calabash every so often as an offering to those spirits, and call your baby *Anie*.

In addition to being misnamed, your sick or crying baby may be trying to tell you about some things from *wrugbe* that are missed. Young babies especially miss cowry shells, old French coins, and silver jewelry – the treasures they had while in *wrugbe*. We might recommend a single shell or coin on a necklace, or lots of cowries strung together on a bracelet. In giving your baby this jewelry, you'll show that you respect your child's memories and desires. As soon as you provide the jewelry and begin using the name the child wants, your little one should stop crying and return to good health. That will show you that we diviners speak the truth!

Another way your child may fall sick is if you, your husband, or someone in your families has violated one of the Earth's taboos and hasn't yet offered a sacrifice as an apology. This is very serious. The Earth may remind you of your debt by making your baby sick. The diviner will tell you what to offer the Earth to apologize. Buy the egg, chicken, or palm wine right away so that you don't delay your child's recovery. Remember, once they fall sick, babies can die quickly.

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IF YOUR BABY DIES

A Grandmother's Words

I know it's very sad to think about, but in our world it's likely that you'll bury at least one of your children, perhaps more. Twin babies are especially vulnerable. For example, if a visitor thoughtlessly remarks that one twin is larger than the other, the smaller twin may feel insulted and decide to return to *wrugbe*. If your baby dies, the body will be buried in a muddy patch behind your home. I'm sure you and your husband will be too upset to attend the burial.

If this is your first child to die, there will be a special *fewa* funeral. Before being buried, your baby's body will be laid out on many layers of special cloths. You and your husband must stay for three or four days in a newly built house without coming out at all, except to go to the bathroom. While you're in the house, two or three ritual specialists will sit with you. These women have paid dearly for their knowledge: to gain the secret information they now possess about how to do a *fewa* funeral, they each had to bewitch a pregnant or laboring woman in their family, whose soul they sold to the ritual specialists who taught them! You should respect them, for power is on them. The oldest among them will sleep in the same room with you and your husband, and for two or three nights you and your husband must have sex in front of her. If the baby died just a short time after being born, sex will be very uncomfortable for you, but you have no choice.

After this, the old woman will take you and your husband into the forest. There, she'll shave the hair on your heads and bodies, wash you with special medicines, and put mourning jewelry on you both. Many other things will happen that I can't reveal. People who haven't gone through *fewa* themselves can't approach you during these rituals, or their own children – current or future – will be at risk!

Nowadays, some people, especially Christians and Muslims, don't want to bother with this ritual. They say it's too difficult and humiliating. Shame on them!

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A Diviner's Words

There are many reasons that babies die. One is that the mother hasn't consulted a diviner to discover who the baby was in *wrugbe*, or what the baby misses from there. Such babies are so sad that they decide to return to the other world. Another reason is that you're mistreating your baby. If you don't nurse your baby enough or seek good medicines when the baby is sick, your child's *wrugbe* parents will call their suffering one back. Still another reason is that the Earth may be punishing you. For example, you know that when you first married, you were supposed to ritually confess the names of any lovers you had before your husband; if you covered up a name or two, the Earth may kill your baby unless you offer the proper sacrifice. Consult a diviner right away to find out what you should offer the Earth.

If you're unlucky enough to have two babies in a row die, one of them may take pity on you and return during your next belly as a *Sunu* (if the baby's a girl) or *Wamya* (if a boy). *Sunus* and *Wamyas* are pleased if their mother pats mud over their body every so often, to remind them of the muddy patch in which they were buried after dying in their previous life.

If your child dies, it may comfort you to remember that the younger the baby, the more the little one was still living in *wrugbe*. If the umbilical cord hasn't fallen off yet, the babe hadn't even begun to leave the land of the ancestors, and the village chief won't announce a funeral. If the umbilical cord *has* fallen off, you must wait until the chief announces the funeral to the village before you start to cry.

GOING BACK TO WORK

A Grandmother's Words

For the first two or three months after the birth, you can relax while your mother and other relatives pamper you. Your major job is to nurse and bathe your new one. I always tell mothers to stay a full three months at home, but nowadays women often rush

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back to their farms after only two months. Start slowly – at first, only one or two half-days a week in your fields, then three or four half-days. If you start back working full-time too early, you won't recover properly from the delivery.

All this will be much easier if you find yourself a *leng kuli* – a baby carrier to care for your baby when you're busy. This is especially important if you have other young children. Your *leng kuli* can carry your child when you walk to the fields balancing a heavy load of crops, farm tools, cooking pots, or firewood on your head. While you're working, she can take care of the baby in the fields, and you'll only need to stop working every so often to nurse.

Try asking an older daughter, a younger sister, or a niece to be your *leng kuli*. If you can't find a relative, look around the village or neighborhood. To interest someone, make sure the baby looks beautiful! After the morning bath, apply your baby's face paints carefully: draw the green medicine lines across the little forehead and down your baby's nose as straight as possible; and chew a kola nut well before spitting out the juice, to make sure it's a bright orange for the dot over your baby's soft spot. In addition to the medicine jewelry that your mother's given you or that the diviner's prescribed, add a few other items for beauty – a belt of shiny green beads, an anklet of bells. Rub shea butter all over your baby's skin after the bath. The skin will glow, showing off your baby's beads, shells, and bright face paints to great advantage. If your baby is irresistibly beautiful, someone will be eager to carry her for a few hours; if you're lucky, she might offer to be a regular *leng kuli*.

Even a seven- or eight-year-old can be a good baby carrier. Make sure you show her how to tie the baby onto her back firmly with your *pagne* cloth. Of course, if she's young, she won't be able to carry the baby for too long, but at least your little one will get a lot of short naps. If your *leng kuli* does a good job, after a few months you could buy her a pair of earrings at the market. At the end of a year, buy her a dress if you have the money. Then she'll be happy to continue as your *leng kuli* for another year.

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AS YOUR BABY DEVELOPS

A Grandmother's Words

It's important to watch for signs that your baby is developing properly. Several steps are especially significant.

Teething

Babies shouldn't be born with teeth! If your baby is born with a tooth, this is a bad omen: the baby is in a rush to leave *wrugbe* and trade places with an elder in this life. In the old days, we asked a female elder to drown such a newborn.

When your baby starts to cut the first tooth, pray that it comes through as a lower tooth. If your baby cuts an upper tooth first, this is also a bad omen. In the old days we would drown such a baby as well, or else someone in the baby's family would die.

Nowadays, we don't kill such babies, for we know we could go to jail if the gendarmes heard about it. We just worry and look to see who in the family will die.

Walking

When your baby starts to crawl, you'll be proud, for this is the beginning of learning how to walk. But you must discourage the baby from walking until a full year in this life. (The diviner may explain why this is so important.) You might need to keep the child strapped to someone's back as much as possible, and your husband may have to spank the baby for trying to walk too early. If your child is still determined to walk before the first birthday, string a *lagba* bead onto a cord and tie it around the baby's waist. With this powerful belt, your baby should just sit still.

Nowadays, some young parents don't listen to their elders and they allow their babies to walk early. Some even look for medicines to *encourage* early walking! Perhaps they're trying to be modern. I hope you don't listen to these people.

On the other hand, if your baby is over a year old but has not yet started walking, you should make every effort to find proper medicines to encourage those first steps. After all, having sex is absolutely forbidden for you until your baby can walk properly!

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This restraint is important to protect your child. If you become pregnant before your baby learns to walk, the new one in your belly will steal breastwater from your baby. The baby will never learn to walk properly, and eventually the poor child will die. If you have a co-wife, it won't be so difficult for your husband to wait until your baby walks before having sex with you. I am sorry to say this, but if you have no co-wives, it would be better for your husband to visit one of the Ghanaian sex workers who bake "women's bread" in our villages than to bother you.

Your Listening and Talking Baby

You'll probably talk to your baby from the first day of life in this world. When your baby cries, as you offer a breast, you'll look into the little one's eyes and say, "Shush! What's the matter? I'm sorry!" or other such phrases. Doubtless you've seen many mothers talk like this from their babies' first days in this world.

When your baby's a little older, it's important to teach the words for all the relatives. Your baby won't be able to say our elaborate greetings properly until learning this, since we always address each other as Uncle, Big Sister, Little Mama, and so on when we greet anyone. And you know how important it is to say *hello* to almost everyone in the village every morning and evening, to show that we're all part of the community.

After learning to greet politely, the next thing your baby must learn is how to tease certain relatives by tossing dirty names at them. Anyone your little one calls Grandma and Grandpa – not just your parents and your husband's parents, but all their sisters and brothers as well – will tease your baby son by calling him jokingly, "Shit prick!" "Red prick!" "Raw shit scrotum!" or your daughter, "Shit cunt!" "Black cunt!" "Tiny cunt!" Your child will soon learn that this is all in good fun, and you should teach the little one to engage in the repartee by laughingly shouting back dirty insults. There's nothing cuter than a one-and-a-half year old shrieking out with delight, "You red balls!" to her doddering grandfather or "You black asshole!" to his old grandmother. Later, when you become much stricter with your children, it will be a comfort to them to have such a relaxed and teasing

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relationship with their grandparents. They may even seek refuge with them if you chastise or punish them too severely one day.

A Diviner's Words

Some children's character comes from who they were in their last life. For instance, Wamyās and Sunus are sad a lot. Having died as a baby in a previous life, they can foretell a death. If a Wamyā or Sunu appears sorrowful, gets angry easily, or even hits people for no reason, don't be too harsh, or the child may decide to return to *wrugbe*. Remember, the bad behavior you're seeing is simply a sign that your son or daughter is distressed from secretly knowing that someone will soon leave this life for *wrugbe*.

Walking

Grandmother has already warned you that your baby must not walk before the end of the first year. Now I will explain why. As you know, babies are reincarnations of our ancestors. With souls crossing back and forth every day between this world and *wrugbe*, babies and elders are closely connected. They both have only a fragile hold on this life, and it's easy for one to replace the other. An infant who walks before a year walks on the spirit of one of his or her grandparents, and that elder will soon pass to the other world.

As Grandmother mentioned, you must also make sure that your baby doesn't start to walk too late. If your child doesn't begin to take some steps soon after a year, it may be because you and your husband started having sex before the baby began to walk. Forbidden sex can cause a very serious condition that we call "split leg," which can prevent a child from ever walking. If this could be your child's problem, you'd better consult a diviner who can prescribe the right remedies, or your child will soon depart this world.

On the other hand, if your baby is slow not just in walking, but in other ways as well – perhaps not talking on time – it may be that you committed a serious violation while pregnant. If you ate food while walking along the path to your fields in the forest, your

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child may actually be a snake. If so, there's no treatment; the child will never be human. If you can afford it, consult a specialist who can offer what appears to be medicine, but is really snake food, to your child in a secret ritual in the forest. If your child ignores the food, it probably means that your son or daughter is actually human, and there's some other reason accounting for developing so slowly. But if the medicine seems delicious, your baby will eat the food and immediately start turning back into a snake and slither off into the forest. If you're lucky, the creature won't return the next time you take a belly, and you'll give birth to a person. If you suspect your baby may be a snake, you should do this ritual as soon as possible. The longer you wait, the more the ritual specialist will charge, and the harder it is for the medicine to take effect – in the end, you may be left with a snake-child. The creature will never have a family, for who would marry a snake?

Your Listening and Talking Baby

In *wrugbe*, unlike life in this world, different groups of people live together and understand each other's languages. When a *wru* is reborn into this life, the baby remembers all the languages that were spoken in *wrugbe*. For this reason, your baby will grasp everything that you – or anyone speaking any language – says. As your baby starts to leave the afterlife and join this world, the memory of all those languages will start to fade. Eventually your child will understand only the languages that he or she hears in this life.

Until then, your baby understands everything anyone says, so talking may help lure your little one into this life. If you look your baby in the eyes and speak softly, your child will probably babble something back. Doubtless you and everyone else around will delight in such sounds. You should teach your baby to talk real words by speaking *for* him or her. For example, if someone asks the baby, "How are you?" you can hold up the child and answer, "I'm fine." After a few months of this, your little one will be able to join in conversations.

At the same time, you should train your baby not to interrupt adults' speech, since children must respect their elders. If your

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baby is interrupting your conversation with another adult, even with adorable noises, you must say firmly, “Stop talking!”

On the other hand, if your very young infant utters a real word or two in Beng or any other language we know, this would be a very bad omen. While babies understand all languages, they *spea*k only the language of *wrugbe*. Speaking a language of this world would be a sign that your little baby has already left *wrugbe* completely to enter this world far too early. This is bad – a grandparent will soon die.

TOILET TRAINING

A Grandmother’s Words

You and your mothers began to toilet train your baby the day the umbilical cord fell off, and I assume you’ve continued to give your baby an enema twice a day, every day, since then. By the time the little one is a few months old, you shouldn’t have to worry about pooping during the day at all, as long as your baby stays healthy. This is good – then you can give your baby to a *leng kuli* without worry that the baby carrier’s clothes will be soiled as she carries the baby, for that would be a great shame on you! Later, when your son or daughter is walking, you can show your child the places we have in the forest for shitting. When you teach your child about wiping with a dried corn cob, emphasize how important it is to use the left hand, *never* the right.

As for urine, it really doesn’t matter where a little baby pees. If someone’s lap gets wet, they’ll just hold up their clothes to let the urine drip off. Once your baby can walk well, show the little one to pee anywhere on the village outskirts.

WHEN TO HAVE ANOTHER BABY

A Grandmother’s Words

You may be considering how many children to have, but *eci* is the one who decides this. We old women do have secret methods to

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keep from getting pregnant, but ordinarily they aren't for young women with only a few children, so I won't divulge them here.

However, if you have one difficult pregnancy or childbirth after another, a witch may be trying to kill you. Perhaps she's sworn a pact to bewitch a pregnant woman in the clan, as an entrance fee into one of the women's secret ritual associations. Until she kills another pregnant or laboring woman in your mother's clan, your own pregnancies won't be safe. In this case, do anything you can to prevent becoming pregnant again for a while. You can even try to find out about the new methods available in the cities.

AS YOUR CHILD GROWS UP

A Grandmother's Words

As your baby grows, teach the child that being young means having no authority over anyone except those who are even younger. Remember that in our language, one word for "child" really means "little slave." As soon as the little one can walk confidently, don't hesitate to send your child on errands in your village or neighborhood. Even two-year-olds should be able to find their way to Grandma's and Little Mama's houses and back again.

You can accomplish many important things by sending your toddler on an errand – say, to tell your sister you'll carry her baby tomorrow, or to give a dish of palm nut sauce to your mother. Your child will get to know many people early on. This is very important, since our lives are always filled with people. It will especially help the little one learn who's who in the family. For instance, when you tell your child to bring a dish to one of your husband's younger brothers or male cousins, refer to him just as Little Father, but provide hints – the Little Father who lives next to so-and-so, or who has light skin, or who's short. In this way, the baby should soon understand which of the many Little Fathers in the family you mean.

From doing errands, your child will also become familiar with the neighborhood; by three at the latest, your little one should be able to navigate anywhere in the village (or your *quartier*, if you

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live in a city). Then, your child will feel confident to join in the groups of children who play together, roaming far and wide around the village or neighborhood when they aren't working for their parents. And of course you'll gain a helper – a great boon, considering how much work we women have to do!

A FINAL WORD ABOUT GOOD MOTHERS AND BAD MOTHERS

A Grandmother's Words

Being a good mother isn't something that comes naturally to every woman. Almost all of us will bear children, but that doesn't mean we must be the ones to raise them. If you show tendencies toward being a bad mother, consider giving your children to others who are more fit for the job. Perhaps your sister is an especially good mother – give her one or more of your sons or daughters to raise with her own. Your and your sister's children are sisters and brothers anyway, not cousins, so this isn't a matter of adoption. If you turn out to be bad at mothering but don't acknowledge it, your relatives and neighbors will let you know. If you beat your children too much, one of your husband's relatives is bound to take the children. Even a frail but loving grandmother is better for children than a vigorous but mean-spirited mother.

Still, being a good mother isn't really difficult or complicated. Of course, you have to make enough money to buy what's necessary for your children. You'll need plenty of soap to bathe them twice a day, and if you buy cooking oil, salt, and occasionally a fish or a piece of meat, your children will appreciate your tasty sauces. Other than that, if you're kind, it's enough. Even a madwoman in one of our villages is a good mother, because she manages to feed and bathe her children. If she can raise her children well, you probably can too.

A Diviner's Words

Bad mothers don't consider that their babies have *nining* – souls that come from another life. These mothers don't consult a

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diviner to discover the lives that their babies were leading in *wrugbe*. As I've been telling you all along, when your baby emerges from your belly, the little one is leaving behind a life lived elsewhere with another set of parents – in a place that's invisible to you, but that your baby can describe to the spirits, who can then describe it to us diviners. One of your main responsibilities is to figure out who your baby is and what your baby misses from *wrugbe*. This is so important, I can't remind you enough times! If you consult a diviner regularly about your growing child, you'll be a good mother.

Everything I've told you, I've learned from the spirits. Have I lied?