

Infants, Ancestors, and the Afterlife: Fieldwork's Family Values in Rural West Africa

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SUMMARY *When Nathaniel, a six-year-old Euro-American boy, was assigned the identity of Denju, a revered village ancestor in a rural Beng village in Côte d'Ivoire, what did it mean—for the child, for his parents, for his village friends, for the conduct of his mother's anthropological research? Likewise, when Nathaniel's father, Philip Graham, learned in the village the news of his own father's passing, what did it mean to Graham—and for the writing of his novel-in-progress—to discover that his village neighbors were certain that the soul of his deceased father had entered the Beng afterlife and become friends with Denju, the ancestor for whom his son had been named? How did such family sagas combine in unexpected ways to shape Alma Gottlieb's field research project on the cultural construction of infancy? Making use of the three distinct voices of mother/anthropologist, father/writer, and son/student, this article explores how a range of cultural, literary, political, and psychological issues intersected in unexpected ways during fieldwork, recasting the experiences of one North American family of three people living in a rural village in West Africa.*

Alma

After spending three months in a Beng village in the West African rain forest, our then-six-year-old son Nathaniel returned home having lost six of his forty or so pounds and host to two forms of intestinal parasites and one type of intestinal bacteria. To get rid of his unwanted stomach guests he had to take 40 of the most bitter-tasting pills ever invented. Despite this, Nathaniel continued to plead with us to return to Africa.

While we had long wanted to share the African part of our lives with our child, my husband Philip and I had been very nervous about taking Nathaniel to Côte d'Ivoire. Some of our anxiety was medical, some psychological, some professional. For his part, Nathaniel was alternatively curious, excited, and terrified. When he heard about all the shots he would have to take ahead of time, Nathaniel begged, "Can't we just stand outside Africa and look in the window?" Philip and I were appalled at how little we had prepared our young son for the basic

realities, even contours, of Africa. If he was convinced that Africa was a house, what could he possibly understand of the infinite complexities of the upcoming cross-cultural experience that would soon engulf him?

On the psychological side, we had no idea whether Nathaniel himself would take to the village or feel thoroughly excluded. How could he play with children whose language he did not understand? Would he insert himself into play groups whose children had lived with one another in a small community for years? Would he ache for his friends from home, his toys?

As it turned out, once in the village, in a scant week Nathaniel seemed to have forgotten about all he had left behind and plunged himself fearlessly into village life, finding cultural riches that more than made up for the technological lacks. In so doing, he also taught me much about Beng society that had previously been invisible to me.

From my earlier fieldwork I had constructed an image of Beng society as thoroughly gerontocratic. Dan Sperber (1975) has wisely observed that in observing foreign cultures, anthropologists tend to pay attention to that which is different from their own society's customs and to gloss over, even to be unaware of, that which is similar. In Bengland, I had doubtless paid quite a lot of attention to gerontocracy precisely because it was so different from the way my own society is largely arranged, with old people frequently cast aside like so much garbage—as a Taiwanese student of mine once put it after doing fieldwork in a nursing home in Champaign-Urbana (Hwei-Syin Lu, personal communication, November 1988). Concomitantly, during my previous field trips to Bengland, I had ignored the existence of friendships across generations, as well as the respect that old people in turn pay to children—which, thanks to Nathaniel, I began noticing regularly in Beng society.

It started when we remarked on all the attention that was showered on Nathaniel by the adults in our compound. Initially, I wrote that off to his status as an obviously well off guest—and, as Philip will discuss, one accorded a locally venerable ancestral lineage at that. But soon I began noticing that many other adults treated Beng children of all ages with a level of respect that I had not previously observed, quietly asking their opinions while seemingly issuing them orders. The one case of child abuse I witnessed—a young mother who hit her eight-year-old son daily—was the subject of much continuing criticism by virtually all of the perpetrator's family.

Moreover, although Beng children, for their part, do show marked respect for their elders as long as the children are near those elders, I had not paid enough attention to how independent those children are a good deal of the time. When they are not required to work for their parents—and this varies by season and work schedule—they play in groups, sometimes small, sometimes large, often changing from moment to moment, and usually of mixed ages. The whole village is potentially their play space. Parents often have no idea where their children are and, unlike Western, urbanized parents, are not concerned for their safety. Though by no means homogeneous or conflict free, the village is nevertheless conceived as a moral community, and parents naturally assume that there will always be some adults, teenagers, or even other (barely older) children who can look out for their young children as they roam through the village.

After a few weeks, Philip and I found ourselves joining in this assumption, as we would later realize to our amazement when we had not seen our own son in an hour—or even two. Nathaniel himself quickly grew comfortable with the village as his playground and, using great detective skills, figured out literally how to track Philip and me down when one or both of us had left the compound for an interview and he had chosen to stay behind with his friends but then

suddenly needed to see us. Like an accomplished !Kung hunter, he followed our tracks: the footprints of our L. L. Bean hiking boots on the dusty ground were quite distinctive! Nathaniel and his friends soon turned this into a great detective game, romping through the village quite gleefully in search of those ground-level clues.

Nathaniel put these observational skills to good use in becoming an apprentice anthropologist that summer, observing details that any fieldworker would be pleased to have reported. The following is a snippet of a conversation we had, talking into our tape recorder after attending the funeral of the village chief, who died while we were in Bengland:

Alma: Do you want to say anything about the funeral yesterday?

Nathaniel: Oh, we saw a witch!

A: We saw a witch there, mm-hmm!

N: People say women with beards on their chins are witches—only men are supposed to have those.

A: That's right, that was interesting. She really did look witchy, I must say.

N: Yeah, she really did. She had one tooth sticking out!

Being a good observer certainly helped keep Nathaniel confident that he could cope with unexpected developments. This is a skill that Beng parents value in their children as well. Not only do villagers assume that any adult, teenager, or older child will keep an eye on any young child within their sight, they also assume that children from the age of being competent walkers (somewhere between one-and-a-half and two-and-a-half years old) are somewhat able to fend for themselves. They should even be able to find their way back to their own compound at a very early age. Chantal, a feisty two year old in our compound, disappeared from sight many mornings, only to emerge at noon for lunch and then again around five for dinner. Though too young to report her day's travels, others would chronicle them for us: she regularly roved to the farthest ends of the very large village and even into the forest to join her older siblings and cousins in the fields! With such independence, even toddlers should be alert to dangerous wildlife such as snakes and scorpions, and they should be able to deal with them effectively, including locating and wielding a nearby machete. Toward the end of our stay that summer we realized how acclimated Nathaniel had become to local habits when we saw him hacking away at unwanted grass in our compound with a large machete that he had casually commandeered.

The relative independence of Beng children—which was certainly in marked comparison with that of the middle-class, American children I know first-hand—echoed a pattern I was finding elaborated in my work that summer: that infants are conceived of as people with their own sense of desire and their own memories. Colic is treated as a sign that the infant “wants” something, and that desire must be translated by a diviner, who then instructs the mother what to purchase—or what to rename her infant—in order to make the child happy (Gottlieb 1995). In contrast to other societies—for instance, the Ifaluk of Micronesia, who see all children under the age of six years as incapable of learning (Lutz 1988)—the Beng say that infants, having just emerged from the world of the afterlife and its ancestors, are sentient and intelligent small people who know quite a lot (Gottlieb 1998). In fact, they understand all languages spoken by humans and only specialize in what will in effect become their “native” language later, simultaneously losing their ability to understand other languages. Here, the Western scholarly model of “language acquisition” would be better conceived as one of “language choice through loss.” Because of this Beng model of infants as multilingual and newly reincarnated ancestors, Beng adults—not only

mothers but all relatives and neighbors who may be around the household—pay quite a lot of attention to even the youngest of babies, asking them what ails them when they fuss and in turn imputing motives and desires that Westerners would likely think inappropriate for such small people. This practice influenced my fieldwork quite directly: I paid special attention to this aspect of the interactions between infants and adults after observing the respect that adults pay older children—something I first noticed because of Nathaniel. In this way, and apart from his own efforts to help me, Nathaniel became a sort of inadvertent field assistant simply by his presence, pointing me to subtle timbres in relationships that challenged my monolithic conception of power relations in Beng society.

The respect that Beng adults regularly show children has much to do with the spiritual lives of infants and young children (Gottlieb n.d.). As Philip will discuss, Nathaniel himself was bestowed with a spiritual connection that summer.

Philip

Shortly after our arrival in Bengland with our son Nathaniel, the question arose as to what Beng name he should be given. Alma and I expected he would be given a day name, much like the names we had received when we had first arrived among the Beng in 1979. But Kokora Kouassi, an old friend and respected Master of the Earth in the village of Asagbé, came to our compound early one morning to describe the dream he had just had: he had been visited by the revered and ancient founder of his matriline, Denju, who confided that Nathaniel was his reincarnation and so should be given his name. The following morning a small ritual was held, and Nathaniel was officially announced to the world not only as Denju but as N'zri Denju—Grandfather Denju—an honorific that came to be used even by Nathaniel's closest playing companions. Alma and I also took to addressing our six-year-old son as "Grandfather"—a somewhat disorienting experience. The following is a short conversation that Alma and Nathaniel recorded about the event at the time:

Nathaniel: Oh, we have to tell about my Beng name.

Alma: Your Beng name? Didn't we tell about your Beng name?

N: No!

A: Mmm! First of all, do you want to say what it is?

N: N'zri Denju.

A: Mm-hmmm.

N: And N'zri means "grandfather," and Denju is the first chief of the village we're staying in.

A: Mm-hmm. The first chief of the clan, anyway—which is like a family. Mm-hmmm. And people call you "N'zri" because it's like you're their grandfather.

N: Because that N'zri Denju was a grandfather.

A few days later, Kokora Kouassi was visited once again by the original Denju in a dream. This time, Denju had a warning for his reincarnation's parents: Alma and I should never hit our son, he announced, because it would be tantamount to hitting the original Denju, founder of a clan, and for this disrespect we would have to sacrifice a sheep and two chickens—by local standards, a hefty penalty indeed.

Nathaniel was delighted by this news. He was now in possession of an unusual insurance policy—valuable currency in a child's world—though he had little to fear on this topic: Alma and I, while fallible parents, are not believers in corporal punishment. Kouassi's dream did, however, serve to underline the double vision with which we now regarded Nathaniel in the village: he was our exuberant

American boy, and he was the reincarnation of a respected African elder; and these two versions of our child had to be negotiated around our Beng friends.

The prevailing Beng view that he was a respected elder, together with the attendant villagewide public approval, seemed to release Nathaniel's energy; and in some ways, the unleashed passions of an American boy in turn helped fuel the continuing interpretation of him as someone special, worthy of being a Beng elder. He suddenly developed a love and talent for art that he had never exhibited before. As if his gaze combined the anthropological equivalent of heightened consciousness with a child's natural clarity, he drew pictures of the village and portraits of his young friends that were startlingly accomplished.

"Don't let me disturb you," he once said quite professionally, pulling up alongside me with his sketch pad while I tapped away at my typewriter. He proceeded to work harder than I was working at that moment, capturing the mechanical niceties of the typewriter, the wrinkles on my brow, even the fly that hovered on the screened window behind me. Another time, as I drove to an extremely isolated village along one of the worst dirt roads I had ever negotiated in Africa, Nathaniel—or should I say N'zri Denju?—sat in the back seat listening to my memorable string of curses and rested the tip of his pencil on the sketch pad that lay across his knees as we jostled along. At the end of the trip he presented me with his creation: one long jagged and craggy line that swept back and forth across the page. "It's a souvenir, Dad, a seismograph of the road," he said. "So you'll always be able to remember it."

"Thank you, Grandfather Denju," I replied—or should I have said "Nathaniel"? I examined that skittish map with wonder, as if it were a record of all the surprises that Africa had bestowed on us, a prescient record of whatever surprises Africa had yet to bestow.

That very summer, when for the first time I was the marveling father of a child in the field, I also became, publicly, a child myself, the child of my own father. One month into our stay in the village, I received the terrible news that my father had died back in America. Because I heard too late to be able to return for the funeral, I decided to stay in Africa and honor my father with a Beng funeral. And so I found myself on the other side of Beng ritual, not as observer but as a central participant, as mourner and bereaved child. I barely managed to stumble through the ritual thanks offered to mourners that I had heard so often before, because until then I had never had to speak them. I assisted in the sacrifices to my father's spirit; I participated in the prayers; I offered a eulogy to my father during a night-long session of funeral songs; I bathed with a wash of medicinal leaves offered by my friends.

Slowly I began to understand what healing meant in Beng terms, and through all the rituals I felt comforted that my father, in an important sense, knew many of the people who now paid their respects: he had read about them for years, in my many letters home as well as the published account of our experiences that Alma and I had written (1993). I imagined his spirit, freed from his earthly body and able now to travel to Africa, hovering above the proceedings, seeing for the first time our Beng friends and family and an entire Beng village that he had previously only imagined.

So I was not particularly surprised when one morning, during those many days of funeral observances, Kokora Kouassi came to visit us and revealed his latest dream: my father was now in *wrugbé*, the Beng afterlife, where he spoke perfect Beng, and he had a message for me. He was hungry and asked that we leave outside the door of our mud house that night some yams and a little palm wine—which we did. Here is how Nathaniel tested out the reality of that offering:

Alma: Tanti said even if the food was there, they still ate it. It doesn't mean that they didn't eat it, because you know what came to eat it? Their spirits came to eat it. And so they might have eaten it invisibly. That's what Tanti told me. And the reason that we left that food for them is in fact because of another dream, right? That—

Nathaniel: Aba Kouassi had a dream that Grandpop and N'zri Denju's spirit, the two of them made friends, and then they were both hungry, and then we put something to eat on the chairs, and then—right, now, let's go look!

A: Okay, let's go look right now, we'll go see!

And so began a series of communications with my father through Kokora Kouassi's dreams, and my leave-taking of my father somehow became, strangely enough, no leave-taking at all.

When Kouassi, too, revealed that my father and the original Denju had become friends in wrugbé, he told us that they spoke often of Nathaniel—or should I say N'zri Denju?—remarking how proud they were of his accomplishments, of his promise for the future—a pride, of course, that I shared. These early morning conversations always left me a bit dizzy: my father and I and my son too (who was also my spiritual Beng grandfather) were now united in the nurturing dreams of my old friend Kokora Kouassi. As I listened I became somehow mourning son and doting father and respectful grandson all at once. Here was another kind of seismograph of what was shaking me, an invisible one and yet one no less able to chart a complicated landscape: the palimpsest of family relations that we all are and will be. Years ago, Beng culture had helped me to discover who I might be, and now, so many years later, it helped me understand where I fit in the larger stage of family and how to manage its losses and gains.

Note

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We dedicate this article to the memory of the late Kokora Kouassi, who dreamt Nathaniel's Beng name.

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