

## Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

ALMA GOTTLIEB, *The Afterlife is Where We Come From: The Culture of Infancy in West Africa*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 2004, xxv + 404 p. Index.

Although the anthropology and sociology of children and youth is growing rapidly, there are still relatively few full-length ethnographies and even fewer writings that focus on infants. Thus, Alma Gottlieb's volume on Beng babies of Côte d'Ivoire fills an important niche. More importantly, *The Afterlife is Where We Come From* is a sophisticated, insightful and compelling analysis of infants, infant care, and Beng religious ideology.

Gottlieb's analysis focuses on explicating what it means to be a baby within the particular cultural, social and political economic worlds of the Beng. Using her months of fieldwork and repeated visits over more than a decade to full effect, she demonstrates that among the Beng, babies are believed to be complex, skilled persons who lead full social and spiritual lives. Each baby is a reincarnation of a Beng ancestor and each baby must be tempted and persuaded with daily care giving, ritual practices, and adornment from its parents to leave the *wrugbe* or afterlife, and stay in the here-and-now. Moving back and forth between the particularities of Beng babies and larger questions about biology, nurture, meaning, and agency, Gottlieb demonstrates the broader implications of her findings. She rejects "the assumption of an Everybaby that somehow exists outside of culture" (xvi) and argues that babies – leaky, non-verbal, dependant, and nourishment-centered though they may be – are not merely "biobundles" but social actors capable of influencing their world. Her discussions of the rich and varied social lives of Beng infants, including the value of strangers in those lives, the connection between baby-sitters and Beng mother's agricultural labour, and her analysis of the so-called "universal" milestones in infant development are particularly good.

In addition to ethnographic interviews with parents, caregivers, siblings, and religious practitioners, Gottlieb and her Beng assistants conducted round-the-clock observations of particular babies, and focused observations of particular infant or infant care activities. She uses descriptive statistics to good effect to support and extend her interview data and to highlight the numerous differences between Beng and "Western" infant care practices. The volume is nicely illustrated with photographs drawn from the many field seasons Gottlieb and her family spent among the Beng.

Gottlieb's approach to the study of infants is systematic, comprehensive, and satisfying. The resulting analysis is beautifully organized and provides a model for all of us seeking to explicate complexity without reductionism. Gottlieb skillfully brings well-tested concepts and ideas from anthropologists such as Mary Douglas and Victor Turner to bear in understanding infants in general and Beng babies in particular. For a range of topics—teething, breastfeeding, napping, bathing, enemas, baby-sitting, and more—she considers local meanings, pragmatic explanations, and “observer identified factors” (168) to address important questions: What are the local meanings of religion, gender, person, and kinship, which inform this behaviour? How is this practice a pragmatic response to local conditions of labour and production or the result of larger global forces? How does Beng infant care and development fit within or challenge current Western expert and popular thinking about infancy?

I found Gottlieb's claims to be compelling, interesting, and well supported by her rich ethnographic material. The book's weaknesses are few and minor (e.g., a glossary of Beng terms would be helpful). Gottlieb skillfully unpacks the Beng view that infants are “full persons with independent consciousness” (219) to argue that babies are not passive, but agential and intentional cultural beings. In support of her own argument and the Beng perspective, babies in this ethnography are subjects with their own voices: “Listen to me! I don't want this water. I want that stuff from the breast.”(187). Hence, it is surprising that the concept of agency is not more fully defined or theorized by Gottlieb. In particular, the problems in and results of distinguishing the agency of individual infants from the attribution of agency to the young by adults could have been more fully discussed.

This book will be a welcome addition to the growing number of courses on the anthropology of children and youth, as well, as to anthropologists teaching or researching the life cycle, family, African ethnology, and religion. It has the added attraction of being highly readable by both scholar and undergraduate.

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