**The Spiritual Basis of Infancy and Subsequent Child-Rearing Practices of the Beng (Cote D’Ivoire)**

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**Abstract**

The Beng are a very small population of people that reside in villages in Cote d’Ivoire. Their thoughts on infancy involve reincarnation, and this dictates their parenting and child-rearing practices. “*Wrugbe*”, translated as “spirit village”, is a term used to describe the afterlife, from which children come as re-embodiment of their ancestors (Gottlieb 2004, 80). This essay serves as an exploration of the Beng’s spiritual beliefs of newborns, and why parents treat their newborns the way they do throughout their development. This link creates a child-rearing culture that makes the Beng people of Cote d’Ivoire unique. Important practices to consider involve the social interactions and physical care that parents offer their children in hope of a healthy transition from *wrugbe* to the real world, while keeping in mind that these practices are not without exception. The Beng are a commonly unheard of population, so I rely on ethnographic accounts of their societies published in books and journal articles, as well as first-hand video recordings of the daily lives of the babies that I plan to investigate. By exploring first-hand observational information, I will make important connections between religious beliefs and child-rearing practices, as well as unveiling the reason for their correlation. The significance of this study will rest in uncovering how spiritual and mystical thinking can impact the daily lives of people within a specific culture. More specifically, an investigation such as this allows one to understand how a child’s development is influenced by their culture’s concept of infants.

Africa is home to innumerable small communities that establish their own cultures and values to live by, however, they all have at least one similarity: each of their members start as infants. With this in mind, the derivation of life is a common idea upon which many belief systems are built, and belief systems are often a large part of what distinguishes one cultural group from another. The Beng of Cote d’Ivoire are one such society that heavily relies on their spiritual beliefs regarding infants to guide much of how they lead their daily lives and define themselves as a people. Through their spirituality and associated beliefs in the supernatural, Beng place newborns above all else in importance. In turn, all members of Beng society are impacted by the child-rearing practices that were established to forge a culture centered around successfully raising a Beng newborn. The unique belief that newborns are reincarnations of an ancestor especially sets the precedence for many child-rearing practices associated with infants’ social and physical development and treatment in Beng society (Gottlieb 2004, 15). In this in-depth explanation of multiple Beng child-rearing practices, it will become clear that spiritual beliefs are the reason for why these practices exist.

**Overview of Beng Society**

The Beng are an ethnic group of Cote d’Ivoire that have a complex history. As a historically pacifist people, they were constantly on the move to avoid conflict, forced to live like refugees in their attempts relocate. In this experience of a constant search for sanctuary and movement to different areas that would offer it during times of political and economic unrest, (of which there were many) the Beng culture eventually became a large summation of aspects of multiple different cultures (Gottlieb 1992, 5). However, this pacifist demeanor made them vulnerable, and when France came to colonize in the 1890’s they fronted no resistance, allowing complete rule by France until their independence in 1960 (Gottlieb 2016, 154). Additionally, Bengland, located in an “ecological border zone between the rainforest to the south and savanna to the north”, found itself in the middle of a civil war in the late 1990’s (Gottlieb 2016, 155). The war was between a Christian population to the south and a Muslim population to the north, which serves as a perfect depiction of the triple heritage of Africa: “the indigenous, the Islamic, and the Western” (Gottlieb 2016, 155; Davis-Roberts 1986, 1). Although they remained uninvolved in the war, much of their property was destroyed, requiring work such as farming, hunting, and gathering by men, women, and children to raise funds necessary to rebuild their villages (Gottlieb 2016, 155). Overall, the Beng continue to suffer economically which contributes to lack of access to education and health care to children, causing hardship throughout their typically large families (Gottlieb 2016, 157). The passivity in political events has contributed to a difficult history, but the Beng’s insistence not to join a side has also aided the preservation of their minute, indigenous population in Cote d’Ivoire as opposed to acculturation to another Ivorian ethnic group.

Though many Beng have begun to follow Islam or Christianity, most all people continue at least some practices of their indigenous religion (Gottlieb 2016, 158). The basis of this indigenous religion is the Earth, an object that Beng personify as male and capable of punishing those who violate rules, and the spirits acknowledged include those related to Earth as well as ancestors and bush spirits (Gottlieb 1992, 21). These spirits are believed to impact much of daily life, so Beng often reach out to do whatever is possible to resolve any unrest between themselves and these spirits. Religious practitioners called diviners and Earth priests are often approached to cure or identify the cause of a child’s illness, as they have the ability to communicate with ancestors and translate what the spirits are trying to communicate to the living family member (Gottlieb 2016, 159). This begins to illustrate the complicated link between the life-course of a child and the spirits that the Beng pray and make sacrifices to.

Ancestors are an important part of the Beng religion in their post-life experiences, and infants are an important embodiment of Beng spirituality. After a human’s death, their spirits called *wru* enter the land of the dead called *wrugbe* to continue a life much like on they would live on Earth (Gottlieb 2016, 159). Eventually, the spirit is reincarnated as a newborn, but *wrugbe* is believed to be continued and fully experienced by the new baby until the umbilical cord falls off, at which point the infant is considered a real person. Thus, Beng interpret the birth of a newborn as the beginning of the departure from *wrugbe* by one of their ancestors, although the complete exit may take years (Gottlieb 2016, 159). The slow transition out of *wrugbe* can be marked by the child’s increasing understanding of what truly happens in life, such as death or other drastic events, as well as the forgetting of memories from their time spent in wrugbe and viewing any residual memories as a dream (Gottlieb 2016, 170). Once full enlightenment of the realities of life is gained, generally by age 7, the ancestor remains readily perceived and evident to its living descendants although now they are separate entity from the child they once possessed (Gottlieb 2004, 15). Beng continue to make offerings to the ancestors, however, the offerings are no longer directed towards their child, since the spirit is independent from the child at this point. The leaving of ancestral spirits from children’s bodies also ends the child’s special treatment.

Given these spiritual beliefs, it is obvious that early child-rearing practices will be heavily influenced by Beng values to respect and serve their ancestors, as Beng infants serve as a channel through which Beng can communicate with their ancestors, and thus become the object of such respect and service (Gottlieb 2004, 16). Additionally, parents want to lure their child out of *wrugbe* not just for the ancestral spirit, but for the child’s sake, so that they are able to become their own person, free of being ruled by an ancestor. However, this is difficult to do as babies are said to miss the comforts of *wrugbe* and long to return, so parents work to keep the child happy enough to stay in their world (Gottlieb 2004, 19). In keeping in mind that this loss of *wrugbe* and the end to possession of infants by ancestral spirits happens slowly overtime, “the younger they are, the more spiritual their existence” and the more impacted their childcare (Gottlieb 2004, 16).

# **Social Child-Rearing Practices**

As an embodiment of their ancestors exiting the afterlife, infants are believed to remember much from their time in *wrugbe*, during which ancestors had many capabilities and life was simple and pleasant. Such experiences in the afterlife ensure that all ancestors “live harmoniously and are fluent in all languages” (Gottlieb 2004, 15). This coincides with the idea that infants must understand all languages in early infancy because they are remembering their capabilities in *wrugbe*. However, the memories fade until the child eventually understands only the languages around which it was brought up (Gottlieb 2016, 186). Until a child can speak, Beng care-takers treat their infants in a way that constantly keeps their absolute comprehension in mind.

These presumed abilities in infant linguistics impacts verbal teaching of infants as well as verbal interaction. For example, Beng people address infants directly and speak to them as one would to a fellow adult in the expectation that the baby understands everything they are saying (Gottlieb 2004, 18). Additionally, teaching speech is done by speaking for the child. For example, if someone asks the baby a question, the person taking care of the infant at that time answers in first person, replying as if it were the infant responding. This is believed to serve as a way for the infant to hear what it will one day say (Gottlieb 2016, 186). Beng adults encourage babbling, but with infants’ impressive language capabilities in mind, they also hold babies accountable for interacting with others in a polite way (Gottlieb 2004, 102). For example, Beng teach children not to interrupt, even as a babbling infant, they are “subject to the same sociolinguistic norms of politeness” as those with full language competence, so if they do impede they are verbally scolded (Gottlieb 2016, 187). Although Beng believe in the child’s all-encompassing ability of language comprehension, they can only speak *wrugbe* at the time of birth. If an infant begins to speaka different language too soon, it signifies a departure from *wrugbe* that is too premature and will cause the death of a close relative in order to keep the number of souls in the afterlife and current life equivalent (Gottlieb 2016, 187). Realizing the large influences associated with child language development, the cautiousness under which Beng parents work to teach their infants enough of a language, but not too much demonstrates how impacted child-rearing practices are by Beng spiritual beliefs.

Another dimension of social development is that of the interactions between infant and caretaker. Although in many ways the mother remains a dominant force in Beng culture, multiple caretakers are responsible for bringing up the child and aiding its development. This in part can be attributed to the temptation of infants to return to *wrugbe*. Infants’ memories of their “*wrugbe* relatives” and the easy lifestyle in which there was “economic plenty and social harmony” can lead to feelings of homesickness (Gottlieb 2004, 97; Gottlieb 2005, 106).[[1]](#footnote-1) However, family members work to avoid this at all costs because it means they will lose their child, contributing to the distressingly high infant mortality rate in West Africa (Gottlieb 2005, 106). Beng believe that “babies need to feel constantly cherished by as many people as possible” as a means to hinder the infant’s choice to return to *wrugbe*, so mothers arrange a system of near constant supervision for their babies (Gottlieb 2016, 18).

Caretakers known as *leng kuli*, or “baby holders” are often family members such as older daughters, sisters, or nieces but can also be unrelated villagers as young as seven or eight which is surprising considering their substantial number of responsibilities (Gottlieb 2016, 182). In order to ensure that the babies are kept happy and comfortable at all times, there is a large network of caretakers put into place, so that when a baby gets upset or a caretaker gets tired it may be passed along to the next person. In order to get a number of high quality babysitters, mothers undergo extensive dress, bathing, and decorative processes to make their babies as attractive as possible as a means to “seduce” competent babysitters (Gottlieb 2014, 199).[[2]](#footnote-2) Although much effort is put into finding a satisfactory caretaker, babies spend minimal amounts of time with each one in a given day (Gottlieb 2009, 119). This constant hand-off of the baby can help increase its sociability in the sheer quantity of interactions per day, as well insuring the quality of care during each interaction as time spent with each caretaker is limited. Sociability of babies is important to create as many secure relationships between infant and people in the living world as possible, so that these people become more essential to their lives than those they remember interacting with in *wrugbe*. Essentially, the more people the baby is able to interact with in a meaningful way, the more reasons they will have to stay rather than return to *wrugbe*.

Quality of care also plays an important role in keeping the child entertained to the point that they prefer the living world as opposed to the spirit world. Babies are almost always off the ground, whether carried or tied onto someone’s back, in order to keep them happy, continue skin-to-skin contact, and avoid walking too early, a bad omen that causes the death of a close relative (Gottlieb 2016, 185). When not being held, play commonly includes intimate face-to-face interactions with many adults as well as other children and infants to emphasize their belonging into the society and promote their happiness. Additionally, play is often very physical and involves moving the baby around. For example, Gottlieb observed a sibling forcefully pushing around a young infant in a cardboard box as he cooed and giggled in excitement (Gottlieb 2013a). Overall, the practices involving social development are led by the acknowledgement that infants are reincarnated beings as well as the parental desire to raise a child that is well adapted to and happy in the living world.

**Physical Practices**

Although much of spirituality deals with the unseen in Beng culture, such as the invisible presence of ancestors, equally as much involves outward, physical expression. The lengthy, daily rituals concerning physical appearance alone are enough to make clear the importance of a baby’s presentation: in one day, babies are expected to be bathed twice, administered enemas twice, have jewelry and body paint applied twice, and to be clothed two or three times (Gottlieb 2004, 75). After all of these rituals, Beng infants are not difficult to point out; they are constantly bestrewn with intricate designs of brilliant colors as well as draped in jewelry consisting of beads and cowry shells. These rituals of Beng babies serve a greater purpose than visual appeal, they are a form of protection and respect.

As infants are intermediaries between *wrugbe* and the real world, they are perceived as especially vulnerable at this point in their lives. Vulnerability of infants is both medical and spiritual, but the latter seems to be the guiding matter in terms of practices of protection. This vulnerability is by reason of infants’ weak connections to both the living and nonliving world, and being in a state of limbo, infants are increasingly susceptible to spiritual forces. For example, one specific threat of infants is that of bush spirits whom are highly attracted to the babies because they feel a connection to the infant, both having holds on the spiritual world (Gottlieb 2004, 85). In addition, Earth spirits are common culprits in harming infants in attempt to punish their parents for any previous wrongdoings (Gottlieb 2004, 95). With such threats in mind, women are those familiar with the practices and preventions necessary to protect their babies, including bathing and beautification processes, and are responsible for carrying them out.

Starting with the bathing step in a Beng infant’s daily routine, it is important to note that until the umbilical cord falls off, bathing is done four times a day rather than twice, and the inaugural bath is most important (Gottlieb 2016, 169). Bathing in early infancy is done in attempts to wash off the *wrugbe*, so the baths are substantially more thorough. It is necessary to wash off as much *wrugbe* as possible because it is the “principle of death” (Gottlieb 2005, 106). The first bath of a newborn requires a homemade black soap (*zamla ti*) that is likewise used to wash corpses (Gottlieb 2004, 116). In both instances, this soap facilitates the transitions from this life to *wrugbe*, whether going to or coming from it. After the child’s umbilical cord is detached, the normal routine of baths twice daily begins in attempt to prevent illness called “Dirt” (*gbre*) (Gottlieb 2016, 173). The dirt Beng consider dangerous to the infant’s wellbeing is not the physical element, but an invisible threat that can easily be passed off to a baby and inflict “spiritual contagion” (Gottlieb 2004, 118). Each type of dirt has a different reason for infecting the child and dictates how the infant will be affected, though it is generally death. Countless cosmological inflictions endanger infants, but can be dealt with by bathing rituals.[[3]](#footnote-3) If a mother perceives the threat of a certain “disease” she will contact a diviner to identify the appropriate supplements made from leaves and other natural resources that will be implemented into the baby’s bath (Gottlieb 2005, 108). Most commonly, different leaves and herbs are made into medicinal washes used in place of soap. For example, a leaf from the *vowlo liana* is commonly used as it has a slippery quality that helps the disease to “slide off” the baby (Gottlieb 2016, 177). Bathing becomes more and more important the more suspicion rises that a child is falling ill, so they generally increase in number as do the different supplements implemented. However, the process of treating a child is not finished after the bath, and the additives used in the bathing process are not the only forms of medicine.

Although in some cases body paint is used for pure beautification of a baby, as mentioned in the explanation of intriguing good caretakers, its main purpose is medicinal.[[4]](#footnote-4) After the bath, mothers often lotion and powder their child’s skin which will serve as their canvas. Certain designs, colors, and placement of medicinal paints are specific to what the mother is protecting the child from or promoting in their child’s development. For example, an exceedingly important symbol is that of the bright orange spot put on the fontanel (“soft spot”) of a child’s head (Gottlieb 2016, 176). This marking is to be used everyday as a way to keep the “head road” (begins at fontanel and continues down throat) clear so babies are able to swallow and nurse well, avoiding fever and cough (Gottlieb 2016, 176). However, one must also keep in mind that some painting practices may be harmful to the baby. Referring back to the threat of bush spirits, certain patterns and colors in body paint and clothing must be avoided. For example, red is a color preferred by the bush spirits and will increase their temptations to kidnap the child (Gottlieb 2004, 85). With the appropriate use, body paint provides Beng babies protection, physical attractiveness, and caretakers, which all relates back to the point that the happier the baby, the less likely their return to *wrugbe*.

Jewelry has a dual purpose serving as a gift and another front of protection. Crying is often translated by Beng as “please give me something to remind me of home”, so when a baby is cranky parents take them to a diviner (Gottlieb 2004, 88). “Babies are like spirits, so diviners can talk to them,” and in their communication they identify what the infant misses from their life in *wrugbe* (Gottlieb & Graham 1993, 158). Upon uncovering what object the child longs for in their tantrum, the parents are instructed to buy that good and grant it to the child in the form of wearable jewelry. Often these gifts include cowry shells, the currency of the Beng people, or even true French coins. Although money seems an unusual gift for a baby, there is a relevant spiritual connection; “infants like money because they had money in *wrugbe*” (Gottlieb 2004, 87). In addition to providing the infant with *wrugbe*-home comfort, jewelry places literal and figurative value on the child as an ancestor. In a literal sense, infants constantly carry objects of monetary value on their bodies, and in a figurative sense, it is a reminder that “the little one was recently living a full life elsewhere and thus needs to be respected as a fellow person” (Gottlieb 2004, 89).

In the mode of protection, jewelry comes in countless varieties adorned for multiple different ailments. Accordingly, the more jewelry worn by the baby, the more protected they are (Gottlieb 2106, 174). An important practice of jewelry wearing is that of keeping the baby constantly decorated. For example, even if a necklace were to tear, the mother must retie it to the best of her abilities in the interim of finding a new one (Gottlieb 2016, 175). Any instance of the child bare in terms of jewelry leaves them completely vulnerable to spirits. During a baby’s bath mothers take extra care to clean the beads just as thoroughly as they clean their infant as well as inspect for any signs of tearing or damage, in order to keep their preventative powers effective (Gottlieb 2004, 114). The faith in these beads from protecting their babies are so strong that if the baby acquires sickness with the jewelry on responsible for preventing that illness, mothers blame themselves (Gottlieb 2004, 115). Physical health in Beng culture is explained in spiritual terms, and infants are exceptionally spiritual beings, so health is a large concern for infants.

***Snake Children***

All of the child-rearing practices mentioned so far reflect a positive view of infants due to their retention of ancestral spirits. Most of these practices are driven by attempts to keep the baby as happy and well-treated as the parents are capable, leading to a life of constant attention and indulgence. However, one must recognize that not all Beng newborns are deemed worthy or deserving of this treatment. *Snake children* are a category of children that are described by the Beng to be abnormal, strange, and threatening as they are a result of a mother violating a taboo while pregnant, displeasure by ancestral and Earth spirits, or possession by evil spirits (Bayat 2015, 4). These *snake children*, under true psychological evaluation are children with intellectual disabilities or brain damage, and this is significant as it has been reported that nearly 30% of children under age 15 have some kind of disability in Cote d’Ivoire (Bayat 2015, 3). The name *snake child* comes mostly from the physical likeness Beng see between disabled children and snakes; they appear to both have slithering motions and inability for proper speech (this can actually be explained by problems with fine motor skills) (Bayat 2015, 5). *Snake children*, unlike healthy infants are not granted respect and celebration, but are looked at as malicious and a burden that needs to be dealt with, usually by means of a diviner to identify if the child truly is a snake (Gottlieb 1992, 37). Child-rearing practices in this circumstance are all but nonexistent. Children are often neglected as society looks at them as if they are truly non-human, and they are treated badly by their peers, treatment justified by the belief that “snakes felt no pain” (Gottlieb 1993, 137). One may view such treatment of children with disabilities as inhumane, but in Beng society it is viewed as necessary since snakes are dangerous. In all, this point comes to emphasize that though most all children are viewed as ancestral reincarnations, not all children get this label and its corresponding treatment.

**Conclusion**

The Beng are a small indigenous population whose spiritual beliefs play a significant role in how they raise their children from the day they are born, and this dictates the way many Beng people carry out their everyday lives. Playing such a prominent role in the shaping of Beng culture, this topic exemplifies the part spirituality has in defining who the people in an ethnic group are and differentiating one from all other ethnic groups.

Although many view newborns as a blank slate, as stated in John Locke’s theory of the tabula rasa, the Beng disagree and believe that the younger a newborn is the the more expansive their capabilities. Beng babies, as reincarnated ancestors, require different treatment than if the Beng believed in babies as “blank” and unremarkable, so they have developed unique child-rearing practices for their infants. Beng babies undergo social interaction and physical treatment in ways that the Beng have established as routine, in order to please their ancestors as well as raise a healthy Beng individual. As explained by Feldman-Savelsberg in *Mothers on the Move*, “child rearing is socially reproductive labor” (Feldman- Salvelsberg 2016, 92). This can be interpreted in terms of Beng culture to mean that the energy put into the detailed, laborious child rearing practices required for Beng infants, simultaneously forms networks and connections amongst the Beng as a people. In essence, the Beng are a people defined by their newborns.

Bibliography

Bayat, Mojdeh. "The Stories of ‘Snake Children’: Killing and Abuse of Children with

Developmental Disabilities in West Africa." *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research*

59, no. 1 (January 27, 2014): 1-10. doi:10.1111/jir.12118.

This article includes an ethnographic investigation of the how Africans in Cote d’Ivoire deal with children that have intellectual disabilities whom they refer to as “snake children”. This offers a basis to compare the spiritual beliefs and treatment of “normal” children to that of disabled children within Beng communities. This will be useful in my paper to include an in-depth explanation of Beng beliefs of infants, including those that are disabled.

Davis-Roberts, Christopher. "Part I: Indigenous Africa." In *The Africans: A Reader*, edited by

Ali A. Mazrui and Toby Kleban Levine, 1-15. New York, NY: Prayer Publisher Division,

1986.

This journal contains multiple ethnographies about cultural practices in different countries of Africa. Specifically, the ethnography titled “Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande” explains how the Azande people explain strange life events in terms of witchcraft and superstition. This will be useful in relating explanations of child disabilities to mystical thinking.

Feldman-Savelsberg, Pamela. *Mothers on the Move: Reproducing Belonging Between Africa and*

*Europe*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016.

As a novel about migration of Cameroonian mothers and children to Germany, many cultural practices of Cameroonians are compared to those of Germans. A reiterated topic is that of socialization and how Cameroonian children are raised in a different social milieu. Explanations of traditional Cameroonian child-rearing practices are mentioned concerning social interaction and this will be helpful as many practices overlap with those of the Beng.

Gottlieb, Alma. “Carrying Babies: Video for The Afterlife Is Where We Come From.” Filmed

[January 2013]. *UChicago Press* video, 1:10. January 15, 2013.

<http://www.press.uchicago.edu/books/gottlieb/gottlieb_videos.html>.

This video is from Gottlieb’s ethnographic study. The video shows the practice and reasoning behind why children are often carried. I will use this to explain the expectations of infant’s caretakers.

Gottlieb, Alma, and Judy S. DeLoache. *A World of Babies: Imagined Childcare Guides for Eight*

*Societies*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, November 2016.

<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316480625>.

This book is a collection of eight studies of parenting practices and the problems that parents face when raising their children throughout diverse societies among the world. This book is used as a parenting tool. The specific study that I will utilize is “Luring Your Child into this Life of Troubled Times” as well as the overarching explanation of “Raising a World of Babies”. This source will be useful in explaining child-rearing practices as it supplies expectations of Beng parents and recommendations for Beng parents on raising their children.

Gottlieb, Alma, and Philip Graham. *Parallel Worlds: An Anthropologist and A Writer*

*Encounter Africa*. New York, NY: Crown Publishers Inc., 1993.

This book is a detailed summary of an anthropologist and writer’s experience in the Beng villages of Cote d’Ivoire written in the style of day-to-day journaling. The multiple instances of child-rearing practices mentioned through direct observation will be useful in exploring what practices exist and are typical in Beng society. Also, the beginning of the book states a history and overview of Beng society, that I will use to supplement my explanation of how the Beng came to be.

Gottlieb, Alma. "Babies as Ancestors, Babies as Spirits." *Expedition Magazine*, November 2004.

<https://www.penn.museum/documents/publications/expedition/PDFs/46-3/Babies.pdf>.

This pamphlet that was meant to accompany a museum expedition provide a very general understanding of Beng infants and their practices, However, I will use the photos provided to help describe the traditional physical decoration of infants.

⎯. "Babies' Baths, Babies' Remembrances: A Beng Theory of Development,

History and Memory." *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 75, no. 1

(2005): 105-18. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3556719>.

This article is an explanation of infant memory and bathing practices as rationalized by spiritual beliefs. I will use this article to explain social interactions with infants as we consider their mental abilities as well as practices taken to physically prevent infants from harm such as disease.

⎯. "Is it Time to Detach from Attachment Theory? Perspectives from the West

African Rain Forest." In *Different Faces of Attachment: Cultural Variations of a*

*Universal Human Need*, edited by Hiltrud Otto and Heidi Keller, 187-214. Cambridge

University Press, 2014. 2014.

<http://www.academia.edu/21839922/Is_it_time_to_detach_from_attachment_theory_Pers>

pectives\_from\_the\_West\_African\_rain\_forest.

This book chapter explores the social interactions and expectations of Beng infants. This will be useful in providing information on practices involving social interactions such as babysitters and having multiple care-takers.

⎯. “Playing: Video for The Afterlife Is Where We Come From.” Filmed

[January 2013]. *UChicago Press* video, 1:10. January 15, 2013.

<http://www.press.uchicago.edu/books/gottlieb/gottlieb_videos.html>.

This video was recorded during Gottlieb’s ethnographic study and included clips multiple typical interactions of Beng babies and their caretakers. This shows the face-to-face interactions and active movement of children and their peers. I will use this video as evidence of how attentive caretakers are to Beng infants.

⎯. *The Afterlife is Where We Come From: The Culture of Infancy in West Africa*.

Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004.

This book provides an in-depth study of Beng infants in everyday life and Beng belief in wrugbe. Topics included are spiritual, soiled, sociable, sleepy, hungry, developing, and sick babies. This will provide a basic overview of my essay which I will use to help make the connections between spiritual thought and practices.

⎯. *Under the Kapok Tree: Identity and Difference in Beng Thought*. Chicago:

University of Chicago Press, 1992.

This book discusses “identity” and “difference” in terms of Beng people as Gottlieb explains Beng religion and daily life. I will use this book in explaining the background of the Beng as an ethnic group as well as using their religion to uncover spiritual beliefs of infancy.

⎯. "Who Minds the Baby? Beng Perspectives on Mothers, Neighbours, and

Strangers as Caretakers". Edited by Ruth Mace. In *Substitute Parents: Biological and*

*Social Perspectives on Alloparenting in Human Societies*, edited by Gillian Bentley, 115-

38. Vol. 3. Berghahn Books, 2009.

As Gottlieb explains social interaction of Beng infants, she keeps in mind of the perspective of the mother in this article. She discusses stranger interaction and what that means to infants and their mothers. This article will provide me a way to explain the social systems of which Beng infants belong and why interaction with strangers is okay in their societies.

Stephans, Sharon. "Children and Politics of Culture in "Late Capitalism"." In *Children and the*

*Politics of Culture*, 3-48. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995.

This book chapter explains childhood in terms of culture and how culture works to shape and define childhood. I will use this chapter to support my connections as to how the spiritual side of Beng culture shapes what they define a child to be and how a child should be raised from infancy.

Sudarkasa, Niara. ""The Status of Women" in Indigenous African Societies." *Feminist*

*Studies* 12, no. 1 (1986): 91-103. doi:10.2307/3177985.

This journal article clarifies what it means to be an African woman, and how female identity should not be defined as a comparison to the male role, but a definition that is independent. I will use this article to explain the reasoning behind Beng mothers not being the sole caretakers of their children.

1. It is important to also consider that additional forces contributing to extensive childcare networks are societal; “women [work] in order to meet the responsibilities placed upon the in their roles as women, wives, sisters, daughters, … or citizens” (Sudarkasa 1986, 100). In Beng society there is pressure put on women to return to working in the fields as quickly as possible, and having a baby on their back affects productivity as well as mother’s physical health (Gottlieb 2004, 137). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. These beautification techniques have additional meanings related to protecting child from disease and spirits that will be mentioned later. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A few common diseases that can be prevented by baths to wash off the dirt by which they are caused include “sexy dirt”, “mouth”, “dew”, “corpse”, “full moon”, “new moon”, and “bird”, all of which are further explained in Alma Gottlieb’s book *The Afterlife is Where We Come from* in chapter 5 titled “Soiled Beng Babies”. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. It is important to also consider the political, social, and economic importance of infant attractiveness. Beng view beauty as “illustrative as inner moral strength”, and impressive decoration brings notice to the child, thus more respect and opportunities to the family (Gottlieb 2004, 131). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)