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# WHERE HAVE ALL THE BABIES GONE? TOWARD AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF INFANTS (AND THEIR CARETAKERS)

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*In much anthropological literature infants are frequently neglected as outside the scope of both the concept of culture and disciplinary methods. This article proposes six reasons for this exclusion of infants from anthropological discussion. These include the fieldworker's own memories and parental status, the problematic question of agency in infants and their presumed dependence on others, their routine attachment to women, their seeming inability to communicate, their inconvenient propensity to leak from a variety of orifices, and their apparently low quotient of rationality. Yet investigation of how infants are conceived of beyond the industrialized West can lead us to envision them far differently from how they are conceived in the West (including by anthropologists). Confronting such comparative data suggests the desirability of considering infants as both relevant and beneficial to the anthropological endeavor. [babies/infants, childhood/youth, structure/agency, social theory, West Africa]*

## *Where Have All The Babies Gone?*

Whatever their parenting skills at home, most contemporary cultural anthropologists do not seem to think analytically much about babies. Of course this does not mean that we do not *like* babies. But in our professional lives we have often ignored those small creatures, who do not seem to hold out much scholarly promise, as we have defined the ethnographic imagination. At a theoretical level babies constitute for most of us a non-subject, occupying negative space that is virtually impervious to the anthropological gaze. Moreover, those studies that do privilege infants have been sidelined from mainstream conversations in cultural anthropology. While a new body of interdisciplinary literature is now emerging on the cultural construction of childhood and youth and their active negotiation of cultural life, infants occupy a marginal place even in that literature, which is itself only beginning to attract attention in cultural anthropology, especially under the rubrics of “cultural psychology” or “ethnopediatrics” (for example, Small 1998).

Earlier in this century scholars associated with the “Culture and Personality” school inaugurated by Margaret Mead turned their attention to children—though not necessarily infants. In the U.S. this perspective was quite influential during mid-century (Langness 1975). In some ways the work of Beatrice and John Whiting and those who published in their “Children of Six Cultures” series continued this tradition (for example, B. Whiting 1963).

Yet even in these writings infants received less attention than did older children. And critics have pointed out that the model typically overlooked variations in time (historical change) and space (ethnicity/race, class, religion, and gender). Moreover, a Freudian perspective precluded alternative interpretations that might be more appropriate in a given cultural setting. As Mead herself acknowledged in her later years (1963), Eurocentric assumptions underlie the Freudian model, with its culture-blind insistence on a few factors (such as toilet training) that we now know are interpreted variably in diverse cultural settings (for example, Wallace 1983: 213-217). These shortcomings continue to apply to more recent psychoanalytically oriented work on infants and children, though all these works are generally quite rich in data.<sup>1</sup>

In effect, the ethnography of infants is still, if you will, in its infancy. I have identified only two full-length ethnographies devoted to the infants of a single society (Hewlett 1991; LeVine *et al.* 1994). To date, no anthropological journal exists on infancy, and the first anthropological journal on childhood (based in the U.K.) is just now in the planning stage.<sup>2</sup> One rare anthropologist teaching a course on infants reports a frustrating lack of information through the HRAF that hampered her students’ work (Peters 1995). All this poses a stark contrast to our sister field of psychology, with its voluminous canon on infants, including a journal devoted to infancy,

and many others routinely featuring articles on them.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, there has recently been a mini-upsurge of writings on children offered from a political economy perspective (for example, Scheper-Hughes and Sargent 1998; Stephens 1995). Effects of the world economy are actively explored here so as to situate the lives of children in a realistically globalized context, including the daily world of labor (for a review, see Nieuwenhuys 1996). As the impact of the global economy and global culture more generally becomes documented in seemingly remote places (Appadurai 1996; Comaroff and Comaroff 1991, 1997; Dirks, Eley and Ortner 1993; Gupta and Ferguson 1997a, 1997b; Hannerz 1996; Piot 1999), the effort to include children in analyses that take into account international cultural and economic flows is welcome indeed.

Illuminating as are these works on children, they are limited in two ways from the standpoint of an anthropology of infancy. Empirically, most of these writings again focus on older children rather than infants. Theoretically, the political economy perspective itself has its limits. Most notably, a sense of the indigenous perspective of children's experiences and how these fit in with other cultural features of the social landscape—including religion and other ideological structures—is often absent in works espousing a political economy perspective. As with other ethnographies, finding the right balance between the global and the local, the political and the cultural, the social and the individual, is proving a challenge in many of these writings.

In recent years we have begun to see a few very promising examples of American scholars either trained in or influenced by anthropology focusing extensively on the lives of infants and young children and their parents, some of them working in collaboration with scholars in related fields (Harkness and Super 1983; Kilbride and Kilbride 1990; Lancy 1996; LeVine et al. 1994; Munroe and Munroe 1980; Riesman 1992; Super and Harkness 1980, 1986). In Europe, a parallel development is also occurring (Bonnet 1988; Erny 1988; Lallemand 1991; Lallemand and LeMoal 1981b; Toren 1988, 1993). These authors are notable for the extent to which they identify cultural factors affecting infant and child development from sophisticated perspectives.

Discussion of the social matrix of children's lives appears to be developing more rapidly in other fields beyond anthropology. From the early work of Ariès (1962) history and sociology are especially

fertile grounds for emerging discussions of children as culturally situated (Davin 1997; Hunt 1997; Itoua et al. 1988). Indeed, considering the accumulating weight of this interdisciplinary work, two authors have recently suggested that "a new paradigm for the study of childhood is emerging" (James and Prout 1990:2). Even if this developing work tends to underrepresent the experiences of infants in comparison with those of older children, the scholarly development is notable. Together, these authors in anthropology and allied disciplines signal encouraging paths down which a developing anthropology of infancy may be heading.<sup>4</sup>

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Thus far I have deployed rather uncritically the categories of "infant" and "infancy" as self-evident. Yet if cultural anthropology has taught us anything over the past century, it is that the most seemingly transparent of categories often turn out to be the most unexpectedly non-commensurable. This is so for categories as diverse as those relating to time, space, family relations, religion, political structure, and counting systems, among others. Thus what passes for a "week" may vary in traditional African societies from three to eight days (Zaslavsky 1973: 64-65). Or what looks like "politics" in one place—say, Western nations—looks suspiciously like religion elsewhere—as it does throughout much of Africa (Arens and Karp 1989). Even mathematical operations are subject to surprising redefinition—what appears to be "addition" to a Westerner may be interpreted as "subtraction" (and vice versa) among some native Brazilian groups (Ferreira 1997). A century of destabilizing revelations such as these should alert us to the non-transparent nature of many seemingly transparent concepts. Why should the categories of "infant" and "infancy" be any less problematic?

Developmental psychologists routinely define "infancy" rather strictly as the period encompassing birth to the onset of "toddlerhood," which in their definitions normatively begins at the age of two years. (For the sake of convenience, unless otherwise noted this is how I have used the term in this essay.) The transition from the end of the second year to the beginning of the third is taken by psychologists as a benchmark of the latest date at which the young (healthy and developmentally normal) child begins to understand and respond to linguistic communication, and can walk effectively without constantly falling.

Yet this “rounding up” is not a biological certainty but a cultural convention premised on the Western calendar. The pinpointing of two years as the end of “infancy” is also premised on a cultural assumption that life stages ought to be defined by reference to absolute time spans rather than, say, to shifting activities (Evans-Pritchard 1940). Among young children there is of course wide variation in actual verbal and motor abilities at two years (Cole 1983). The indigenous understanding of a life stage will necessarily look different in societies that do not emphasize fixed calendrical points as determinative.

Indeed, rather than identifying an absolute calendrical termination to the stage of infancy, many non-Western peoples take a more contextual approach, dependent on the acquisition of a particular developmental skill (such as walking or talking) that is considered paramount, no matter when it is mastered by a given child. For example, the Lahu of southwest China assert that children inhabit the “red-and-naked” stage (which we might translate loosely as “infancy”) until they can walk confidently and, more importantly, speak with some degree of self-expression. But the Lahu acknowledge that this may occur at different times in different children and resist specifying a set duration of the “red-and-naked” stage (Du n.d.).

Even when an absolute age is accepted as a benchmark for the end of infancy, that age may be historically and cross-culturally variable. For example, the Puritans of New England ended infancy firmly at one year (rather than the two years of contemporary Western science), when (they claimed) the Devil begins to exert control. To counteract this influence, Puritan leaders urged parents to introduce strict discipline immediately following the first birthday (Reese 2000). By contrast, the Ifaluk of Micronesia prolong the period of infancy, using the demonstration of what developmental psychologists would call a moral sense as the benchmark for ending infancy. The Ifaluk maintain that young children remain mind-less (*bush*) for the first five or six years of their lives; they acquire intelligence (*repiy*) slowly from two or three years old but do not fully attain this until they reach childhood (*sari*) at five or six years old (Le 2000, Lutz 1988).

If the termination of “infancy” is variable cross-culturally, the same is true of its inception. Although birth may seem the common-sensical inauguration of this period, Geertz has taught us that what passes for common sense for some may be anything but that for others (1983). Thus some peoples locate

the beginning of infancy in the womb, while others delay it until some time after the birth. In the contemporary U.S. this is a topic of much public debate among (largely secular) “pro-choice” and (largely religious) “pro-life” activists (Morgan 1996).

If the dominant secular Western model suggests that infancy begins immediately after birth, this may not be the case elsewhere. Some Muslim peoples hold a naming ritual after the sixth day; before the ritual, the “newborn” is not an infant at all, not yet having achieved any sense of personhood (D’Alisera 1998; Johnson 2000). Other groups delay the onset of “infancy” even longer. For example, Aboriginal Murngin people of Arnhem Land call newborns by the same term as the word for “fetus.” Only when the newborn begins to smile—typically at three to six weeks—is it called a “child” . . . and this stage lasts until the youngster is nine to twelve years old (Hamilton 1981: 17). Elsewhere, there may be a more indeterminate conception of the onset of personhood itself. Among the Wari’ of Brazil, for example, “personhood is acquired gradually, and it may be lost or attenuated under certain conditions . . . ,” though in some sense it is initiated by the first act of breastfeeding (Conklin and Morgan 1996: 658, 678).

Is a stage of “infancy” even present in all current societies, or might a given society decline to single out the early months or years for special conceptual and/or ritual consideration (as appears to be the case in Arnhem Land)? The relative dearth of knowledge about the lives, habits, and conceptions of infants cross-culturally makes it difficult to answer this and related questions with certitude. While a good number of anthropologists have mentioned infants more or less in passing, few have taken infants seriously as the proper subject of developed anthropological inquiry.

Why is it that, to date, there is no systematic anthropology of infancy?

### *Why Have All The Babies Gone?*

In this section I suggest six reasons to account for the relatively tiny space that infants occupy not only in the empirical world but also in the anthropological corpus.

### *Remembering Childhood, Imagining Parenthood?*

Personal experience may interfere at two levels with the noticeable gap in anthropological discussion of

infants. First, although all adults were once infants, few if any of us remember the experience; this lack of memory (save what parents and others may implant after the fact) may disincline us toward considering an aspect of human experience that seems quite remote from our individual perspective.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, many cultural anthropologists are relatively young—often in their late twenties—when they begin fieldwork, and are not (yet) parents. As such, they may be unaware of the challenges (emotional, medical, pragmatic, and theoretical alike) that infants pose. This ignorance may make it unlikely to envision an anthropological study of the subject. Later, for those do become (overworked) parents, we may not have the luxury of pursuing further fieldwork (on infants or anything else).

Is parenthood in fact a prerequisite for fieldwork on infants? In fact, one of the classic hallmarks of cultural anthropology is to study “the Other.” Surely it is hard to imagine a more different “other” to an adult than an infant, no matter what the cultural background of both. Thus in theory parenthood should *not* be a prerequisite for studying children. Indeed, their “outsider” status could lend an analytical edge to non-parent-anthropologists investigating children’s lives. Yet this analytical edge has not often been sharpened.<sup>6</sup> Ironically, even parents, let alone non-parents, have rarely taken on the challenge of such an anthropological journey to life-cycle “otherness” despite our disciplinary mandate encouraging many to travel down just such an intellectual road. Why should that be?

### *The Missing Agency of Infants?*

The younger the child, the more dependent s/he is on others for basic biological sustenance: by anthropological standards, babies simply look boring. They seem so much at the mercy of others that there does not appear to be any of that push-and-pull between two individuals, or between individual and society at large, that makes for such interesting scholarly consideration. Related to this is the fact that infants in most if not all societies are classified as minors. Unable to testify in court, they have no legal effect on others. Given the legalist foundation to much of our discipline’s (British/functionalist) heritage—especially in Africa—the legacy of such a legally inconsequential positioning of infants seems relevant even today and may unconsciously serve as another factor dooming babies to their ethnographic invisibility. More generally, infants’ opinions seem irrelevant in

making life decisions about others. This does not seem to make for promising material as informants.

Yet as any new parent knows, passivity is far from a complete description of a newborn’s life. Right from the start, infants demand to be accounted for . . . though adults may not interpret those demands accurately. The anthropologist of infants is much like the parent, seeking to learn a new language that has neither a ready-made dictionary nor a published grammar but for which there are undoubtedly hidden rules, if only they can be unearthed—(or, as some developmental psychologists would say, mutually created (see, for example, Lewis and Rosenblum 1974).

Furthermore, members of particular societies may have their own ideas about infant volition and desire distinct from the model of infant passivity just outlined. In some views, infants may be considered determinative of the lives around them. In the course of fieldwork in Côte d’Ivoire the more I investigated the lives of Beng adults and older children involved in infant care, the more I discovered that the preponderance of their day-to-day decisions were made in relation to infants (cf. Weisner and Gallimore 1977). Beng adults maintain that infants are reincarnations of ancestors, so for their first few years in this life, babies remember with longing their previous existence in the “afterlife” (Gottlieb 1998, 2000, n.d.). A major duty of Beng parents is to discern (via diviners) the desires that their infants are said to retain from their previous incarnation, then grant those desires. In this model Beng infants are far from helpless creatures with no opinions or impact on the world. For the Beng, as for many non-Western peoples, the supposedly complete dependence of infants, as it is widely if unconsciously assumed by Western-trained anthropologists, is a non-issue—thus challenging our implicit ideology of infant-as-passive creature, which has foreclosed the possibility of privileging babies as legitimate sites, let alone active producers, of culture.

### *Babies and Women*

Infants in most societies spend much of their time attached to women—frequently though not necessarily their mothers<sup>7</sup>—and until the past two decades women themselves were neglected as social subjects by many anthropologists. Even many feminists have tended to privilege the easily studied—and theoretically safer—“public” domains of women’s lives, which most approximate men’s “public” lives—wo-

men's involvements in the economy, in social networks, and in political structures. The maternal work that women traditionally do around the world has long remained in the shadows, relegated to the so-called "domestic" sphere (Stack and Burton 1994). Even as we have begun to pay attention to women's reproductive lives, the products of all that reproduction—babies themselves—remain in the background.

Happily, feminist anthropologists have re-oriented discussions of women's seemingly private involvements—including the arena defined commonly as domestic—as fully cultural, with a direct impact on "public" events. At a theoretical level the conceptual boundary between public and private, so long transparent, is now being challenged, disturbing the definition of categories that lie at the heart of much of our discipline (Comaroff 1987; Lugo and Maurer 2000). The study of babies ought to profit from such a theoretical shakeup.

### *Can Babies Communicate?*

Babies are—or at least appear—incapable of speaking. Most of us treasure the proposition that language signals the presence of culture. If infants cannot communicate their wishes and views in a way that anthropologists feel proficient in interpreting, how can we admit these small creatures into our cherished domain of "culture"? Even if we suppose that infants lead secretly cultural lives, how would an anthropologist go about understanding the world of these non-linguistic humans?

First, the various noises that even young babies make—often dismissed as meaningless babble by Western observers—may be seen as meaningful in some places. Paying attention to the sounds that infants make, and if and how these are interpreted by those around them, should produce an intellectually productive inquiry.

Moreover, even if babies' babble is locally considered meaningless, the obstacle posed by infants' lack of speech competence to achieving a sense of *Verstehen* may not be as formidable as it appears. The impediments to achieving rapport even with adults are now well known. Field memoirs abound demonstrating that *full* empathy with and understanding of another human being—even one within one's own cultural tradition (however defined)—is at best difficult, perhaps impossible to attain. Nevertheless, most cultural anthropologists would assert that the effort to reach some level of empathy for, and understanding of, a given group of Others lies at the

heart of the ethnographic enterprise. Accordingly, most of us seem to operate with the hope that a *partial* realization of this lofty but elusive goal is possible. The situation with infants may not be much different.

However, to achieve rapport we may need to adjust our field methods. Students of language are now suggesting that the classic criterion for identifying a "text"—the presence of an alphabetic or ideographic system of writing—may be too narrow. Other communication systems—clothing and adornment, games, table manners, and so on—may be productively analyzed as semiotic texts.<sup>8</sup> I suggest that it likewise makes sense to consider infants' lives as texts to be read, though possibly with a new set of glasses.

We would need to inquire how local adults say their babies communicate—and to whom. During my fieldwork Beng adults told me that babies are indeed driven to communicate, but that adults are too unenlightened to understand those attempts. Therefore, Beng parents are urged to consult diviners, who speak the language of babies through spirit intermediaries living in the "afterlife" from which infants are said to have just (partly) emerged. The babies enunciate their wishes, which diviners interpret to parents; in turn, the parents are obliged to fulfill these desires, often by adorning the babies with various items of jewelry (Gottlieb 1998). With such an ideology the methodological imperative for me during fieldwork was to consult with diviners and attend their baby "seance" sessions as often as possible. Privileging communication with spirits via diviners is not something that we are normally trained to undertake. Nevertheless, we owe it to our infant informants to follow wherever their culturally mediated attempts at communication lead us—whether that be to the spirit world, or to some other unexpected but culturally meaningful space—including the body.

The dominance of verbal communication with adult humans to the exclusion of other forms of communication is now beginning to be questioned in some recent writings. Stoller (1997), Farnell (1994), and others have urged us to seek data in modes of sensory communication other than verbal language. Local interpretations of how infants communicate may lead us far afield from our verbal models. Studying infants should enable us to take seriously the theoretical imperative to somatize our methods that these studies are now urging.

*Babies' Bodies, Babies' Leaks*

What they lack in verbal skills, babies make up for in somatic communications. Infants are messy—the younger, the messier. They spend much time engaging in bodily processes rather than intellectual pursuits. Many of those processes involve the expulsion of products that are devalued in Western society (Bakhtin 1968)—tears, urine, feces, spit-up. As intellectuals, anthropologists are not trained to view such exuviae as appropriate sites for scholarly research, despite Mary Douglas' fertile model for analyzing leaks and "matter out of place" (1966).

Yet elsewhere, babies' leaks may be culturally significant. Among the Senufo of northern Côte d'Ivoire and southern Burkina Faso, for example, urine is a gift from an infant, a means to establish a relationship with whoever is holding the baby (Lamissa Bangali, personal communication). This bodily-based model of communication challenges the prevalent Western models of establishing social relationships, which privilege verbal interchange. Shifting the theoretical axis from the vocal cords to the urinary tract would unsettle our language-based model of communication at the same time that it may violate our own notions of bodily pollution.

Another aspect of babies' bodies that can reveal culturally rich data is infants' motor development—long seen by psychologists as somewhat invariable in healthy babies. Paying attention to how Baganda adults in Uganda sit one- to three-month olds on their laps and prop up three- to four-month olds on mats to train them to sit independently and smile, the Kilbrides (1975) have demonstrated that healthy Baganda infants typically sit independently by the age of four months—a third of a lifetime earlier than most infants from Euroamerican, middle-class families sit. The reason is eminently cultural: sitting up and smiling allow an infant to communicate with those around her—a valuable asset in the insistently face-to-face Baganda kingdom. Reclaiming the realm of motor development, which we have largely left to the developmental psychologists as biologically determined, may yield surprises of interest to members of both disciplines, showing this aspect of development to be *overdetermined* by a variety of forces.

An equally promising line of research concerns an activity babies do quite a lot of: sleeping. Anthropologists have been collecting material for some time indicating that co-sleeping—usually but not always with the mother—is prevalent for infants and young children beyond industrialized societies

(Crawford 1994; for a review, see Small 1998: 109-137). An ethnography of slumbering babies might ask: Do babies sleep upright or horizontally, stretched out (as on a Native American cradle board) or curled up (as in a Central American hammock)? How much time are they sleeping in a quiet vs. noisy place? For how long do they sleep without waking—during the day, and at night? And how do local ideologies concerning babies' sleep needs interact with local practices? In other words, what *cultural sense* do such patterns make? Paying attention to the cultural shaping of somatic practices such as sleep may entail adapting the time sampling method that is well developed for the study of adult lives (for example, Gross 1984). The activities of infants from day to day might be compared to gain a sense of both the breadth and the limits to variation in babies' experiences.

Answers to these questions may reveal significant variations not only interculturally but even intraculturally. Even among babies of the same age, significant differences may be accounted for by such factors as family structure, income level, and religious orientation. To psychologists, such studies may ultimately demonstrate that developmentalists must be wary of making cross-cultural generalizations about infant development and behavior based on culturally limited studies. To anthropologists, they may demonstrate that the bodies of babies are significant markers pointing to critical cultural values; at a more theoretical level they further strengthen the case for cultural relativity even as it pertains to the seemingly impregnable bastion of biological development.

*Are Babies Rational?*

Finally, bodily events have long been assumed by Westerners to represent our closest ties to a biological nature, hence more impervious to cultural influence than are other aspects of our lives. No wonder that babies, with their overwhelming involvement in the body, get defined as precultural, what I have come to think of as a "biobundle."

Nowadays, however, such biologically influenced processes as sexuality (Caplan 1987), pregnancy and childbirth (Jordan 1993), breastfeeding (Maher 1992), menstruation (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988), and eating (Counihan and Van Esterik 1997) have been identified as appropriate subjects for the cultural anthropological gaze. Indeed, the notion of the senses and the body in general as culturally con-

structed is a serious proposition (Classen 1992; Lock 1993; Strathern 1997). In keeping with these theoretical shifts, it is time for the somatic statements of infants to be taken seriously by our discipline. Is the prevalent Western model of infant-as-biobundle really applicable universally? The Beng vision of infants as recent exiles from the reincarnated world of *wrugbe*—a model that is replicated elsewhere—suggests otherwise. While seemingly helpless and all body, in the Beng model of the life cycle infants actually lead a rich inner life. Our own, often unconscious assumptions about babies may prevent us from seeing such alien ideologies simply because we do not bother to interrogate the world of babies.

Indeed, if Westerners define rational processes by reference to intellectual capacities—the ability to communicate via speech, to construct complex social ties and institutions, to organize our surroundings, to plan for the future—where does that leave the infant—who apparently specializes in creaturely processes of eating, sleeping and eliminating? Recently Emily Martin (1999) has pointed out the extent to which anthropologists privilege rational systems of thought over other modes of experiencing life. Martin's insight might be applied to the case of infants. Whatever logic they may exhibit, it appears distant from the standards of rationality as enunciated by two thousand years of formal Western thought. With such an intellectually problematic profile, any inclination toward serious anthropological study of such creatures is understandably low (Peters 1995: 14).

#### *Toward an Anthropology of Infants (and Their Caretakers)*

Can infants contribute to social theory? Two “big picture” issues might be productively illuminated. The first concerns relations between structure and agency. Ironically, the tendency for anthropologists to emphasize individual agency has intensified at the same time that the discipline has embraced a discussion of historical and global processes that can easily overpower individual agency at the analytic level. Thus we have seen a spate of biographies of individuals and families (Briggs 1998; Crapanzano 1980; Ottenberg 1996; Shostak 1981; Werbner 1991); accounts of social life co-authored with informants and local scholars (for example, Fischer and Abedi 1990; Gudeman and Rivera 1990; Whitten, Whitten, and Chango 1997); and reflexive, theoretical or programmatic calls for privileging the voices of our

“informants.” At the same time, we see analyses of social life grounded in the effects of a historicized and globalized political economy (Mintz 1985; Roseberry 1989). The divergent directions of these two bodies of literature is a peculiar feature of the scholarly landscape of the past two decades. Can an anthropology of infants and infancy avoid crashing into either the Scylla of pure structure on one shore or the Charybdis of pure agency on the other?

It might be tempting at a methodological level to allow others to speak for infants entirely—to allow an *anthropology of infants* to become an *anthropology of infancy* as seen by others. This would assume that infants are completely subject to structures imagined by adults, incapable of asserting any subjectivity. Yet this is precisely what we need to eschew if an anthropology of infancy is to include not only a consideration of others' perspectives of infants, but equally importantly, an anthropology of infants themselves—premised on a notion that infants may themselves be social actors (Morton 1996), albeit ones who may utilize exotic modes of communication. I have already hinted at some methodological shifts that a fully developed anthropology of infants might necessitate—including becoming attuned to somatic modes of communication, and to local theories of infant communication, as well as to acknowledging that infants, like adults, are part of a cybernetic system in which identity is defined as constitutive of society (Derné 1992; Shweder and Bourne 1984).

Infants might indeed provide us with a median course to chart between the shores of structure and agency precisely insofar as they embody an extreme “test case.” In the common Western view infants appear to be the most dependent of creatures exhibiting the least initiative of any humans. If, elsewhere, infants are held responsible for their actions even in the face of dependence on others, that would be a significant check in the “agency” column. I have briefly given hints of such a scenario based on my own fieldwork; there are signs from other societies that the Beng model of infancy may be replicated (with local variations) fairly broadly outside the Western world.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, some developmental psychologists and psychoanalysts (Fogel 1993; Stern 1985) now embrace a model of infant behavior that is more interactive, accommodating infants' social lives, and willing to acknowledge agency even during the earliest days of extra-uterine human life, than characterized the dominant model constructed by earlier researchers. If even infants actively shape the

lives of those around them, contributing to the constitution of their social worlds, surely there is a lesson for us as analysts understanding social life in general. Yet investigating the ways in which infants are enmeshed in the lives of their relatives (Harkness and Super 1996; LeVine, Miller and West 1988) and in broader institutions—both local and global—should also be a significant check in the “structure” column. If we pay sufficient attention to indigenous ideologies regarding infants as well as to their day-to-day lives, infants may steer us toward the balanced assessment of structure and agency that so many of us crave.

An adequate assessment of infants cross-culturally may also help us overcome our own assumptions about the nature of nature and the nature of culture. Is some/most/all of what we humans do forged by immutable biological structures rooted in genetic configurations that we are only beginning to chart? Or is human behavior shaped by flexible cultural structures that are far more variable than biological models suggest? If the often-appealing compromise position—*Stop, it's both!*—wins out, what proportion is each contribution responsible for, and how do we know?

Westerners tend to assume that the younger the individual, the more dependent on biology is the child, and the more biologically oriented the decisions of her caretakers. Yet developmental norms have been constructed on an overwhelming base of Euro-American, middle-class children, leaving the world's majority of children unstudied, and the so-called “norms” vulnerable to recasting. We have seen that the age at which infants sit independently is variable to some extent, signaling that the timing of this motor achievement is more flexible than

heretofore considered. On the other hand, four months seems to be the earliest that this ability can be mastered. If we can document upper and lower ends of the spectrum for the normal achievement of such early motor tasks, we will be in a better position to assess the role of cultural practices in accelerating or delaying their mastery.

The same may apply to social development. For example, developmental psychologists have long posited that “separation anxiety” is a universal stage of infants from about seven to twelve months. Beng infants occasionally exhibit this behavior at precisely the same stage in their first year that Western infants do. But far from being common as it is in Western infants, in Beng infants it is rare, and actively disapproved of—perhaps because extended families allow for highly flexible caretaking arrangements for a given infant from day to day. Here, the interaction of biological timetable and cultural practices appears delicate but critical.

As these examples suggest, once we begin to study systematically the lives of infants and young children in other cultural settings, we should be able to transcend polemics and assess more realistically the relative contributions of culture and biology to cognitive, emotional, social, and even motor development at the earliest stages of post-uterine life. Thus an anthropology of infants (and their caretakers) should contribute to enduring social and philosophical debates about the role of nurture in shaping human lives. As has been noted before (Lallemand and LeMoal 1981a: 5), children have long figured actively in such conversations, but more as ideological than ethnographic markers. A fieldwork-informed ethnography of infants may contribute significantly to this ongoing conversation.

## NOTES

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wondrous not-babies-any-more with me and continually sharing thoughts about Bengland, I am also deeply grateful to Philip Graham.

<sup>1</sup>See, for example, Parin, Morgenthaler and Parin-Matthéy (1980). Aside from the Meadian perspective, a few other anthropologists' writings from mid-century also reveal some interest in the lives of children. For example, several late essays by Fortes (1987) contain scattered but rich material on children and religion. But aside from such exceptions and the Cultural and Personality school, children, especially infants, generally retained a low profile through much of mainstream cultural anthropology in mid-century.

In the current era some writings on child-rearing and/or the broader span of the life cycle from a non-Freudian perspective may address the socialization of infants in a chapter (or section) on infants (for example, Morton 1996). Likewise, several works looking specifically at rituals pertaining to the life cycle include discussions of young childhood and sometimes infancy (LaFontaine 1985; Ottenberg 1989). Looking farther afield, one finds a large number of general ethnographies may contain chapters or, more likely, short sections devoted to the period of infancy (often combined with a consideration of toddlerhood). But usually these occur in the course of a discussion of issues relevant to that society, rather than constituting a focus on children in and of themselves (W. James 1979; Seremetakis 1991). Provocative though they may be, all these discussions inevitably lack the depth and nuance that only a full-length study can provide.

In addition to these works I note a growing literature among scholars treating a range of issues concerning reproduction. One subgroup subtly explores the cultural imagining of the fetus and the processes involved in procreation more generally (Héritier 1994, 1996; Jorgensen 1983; Morgan 1997); another important group investigates the range of reproductive strategies and decisions available to women in a variety of cultural settings (for a review, see Ginsburg and Rapp 1991; more recent works include Davis-Floyd and Sargent 1997; Franklin and Ragoné 1998; Ginsburg and Rapp 1995). Together, these varied works speak indirectly to the lives of infants and might be brought into play more directly to illuminate a developing anthropology of infants.

<sup>2</sup>Tentatively titled *Child, Culture and Society*, this new journal will be based at the Department of Human Sciences/Centre

for Child-Focused Anthropological Research, Brunel University. Another internationally oriented, multidisciplinary journal, *Childhood* (begun in 1994), includes some anthropological discussion of children but focuses on contemporary social problems rather than an academic approach *per se*.

<sup>3</sup>However, psychologists specializing in infants have tended overwhelmingly to concentrate their research on a very narrow spectrum of the world's babies—those belonging to Euro-American families of the middle class (DeLoache 1992). Moreover, the overwhelming majority of psychological studies is based on observations of infants in laboratories, far from babies' daily lives (cf. Goldberg 1977).

<sup>4</sup>While I focus here on cultural anthropology, I note that of the four subfields of anthropology, it is probably linguistic anthropologists who have paid the most attention to children's worlds (Heath 1983; Schieffelin 1990; Schieffelin and Ochs 1986; for an overview, Schieffelin and Ochs 1986a), though Goodwin (1997) has recently pointed out how much still remains to be researched concerning children's language. It is also worth noting that in the related field of biological anthropology, there is a corresponding lack of scholarly consideration of infant and child anatomy (except for the fetal period). A short article by evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould (1996) is one of the few recent pieces to consider the subject (Stephen Leigh, personal communication). For their part, few archaeologists have been able to contribute significant amounts of scholarship toward understanding the lives of infants and young children in the recent or distant past (Silverman 1998).

<sup>5</sup>I am indebted to Simon Ottenberg for this insight (personal communication, 15 January 1999).

<sup>6</sup>For two notable exceptions, see Briggs (1998) and Ottenberg (1989).

<sup>7</sup>For a case of fathers routinely carrying their babies, see Hewlett (1991).

<sup>8</sup>For a classic example, see Barthes (1972); for a theoretically oriented review of the issues involved, see Hanks (1989).

<sup>9</sup>In West Africa the notion is fairly common, for example, among the Ijaw of Nigeria (Leis 1982), the Bobo of Burkina Faso (LeMoal 1981), the Yoruba and Igbo of Nigeria, and many others.

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