



The Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development

CULTURAL ASPECTS OF PSYCHOSOCIAL DEVELOPMENT: AN EXAMINATION OF WEST AFRICAN CHILDREARING PRACTICES

by Judith Timyan

A report prepared for the Regional UNICEF Workshop:
Toward a Strategy for Enhancing Early Childhood
Development in the West and Central Africa Region
January 18-22, 1988
Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire

INTRODUCTION...	1
BACKGROUND REMARKS...	2
CHILDREARING PRACTICES IN WEST AFRICA...	6
THE APPLICATION OF DATA TO CARETAKER EDUCATION PROGRAMS...	22
REFERENCES CITED...	25

Introduction

For a number of years UNICEF programs have been expanding from purely child survival concerns to include components which foster the healthy psychological and social development of children. This is in recognition of the fact that physical survival and early psychosocial development are interdependent in intricate ways and that the intellectual and emotional aspects of a child's life should not be separated from his physical wellbeing.

Any program which aims to assist deprived or disadvantaged children must be based upon information concerning the nature of the deprivation. As background for child survival programs we are by now well-equipped with data concerning malnutrition and other health problems in West Africa, we must likewise have an understanding of the psychosocial realities of the West African child if we are to effectively intervene in this area of his life.

It would seem that the identification of children who are at risk psychologically and socially must take into account existing childrearing practices, the society's expressed goals in raising children, and its beliefs about the potential and nature of children. We would suggest that assistance programs are most effective when they are built upon current, local attempts at coping with the situation at hand, and thus sociological and psychological data of this nature must be obtained and used. The young parents who need help in adapting to the new modern situation need to feel that some traditional practices have positive value, and that their attempts to integrate change into their childrearing practices are based on essentially sound instincts.

A young child is completely dependent upon the care given to him by his caregivers, and any study of the conditions in his environment must take as a basic element the childrearing habits of his caregivers. We attempt in this paper, by way of a framework/model and with many examples, to suggest areas of investigation into existing practices and patterns of childrearing in West Africa.

Background Remarks

Childrearing During a Time of Rapid Social Change

It is probably safe to say that the goal, whether explicit or implicit, of any human society is to provide the social and physical contexts which maximally promote the intellectual, emotional and social development of its children. In a situation of gradual social mutation where a basically integrated, intact society operates according to long-established cultural norms and social values, any modification of the context, whether in terms of goals or of the economic and social system, operates to produce gradual changes in childrearing practices which are not overly perturbing either to the child or to the culture. The problem in the present-day situation is that a process of very rapid social change is taking place throughout West Africa, triggered by many factors: the move from subsistence economies to cash economies; the continued development of cash crops to the detriment of food crops; the migration of rural populations to the cities; the effect of prolonged drought and crop failure; and the establishment of modern institutions such as primary, secondary and university education and elaborate civil services. The desire to participate in modern society has radically changed the childrearing goals of families, and the need to develop new skills in order to cope with urban life and with formal schooling has had a profound effect on how children are being cared for. This is apparent in the rural sector as well as in the urban context.

Rural to urban migration places not only the immigrating urban family under stress—often forcing them to live in crowded conditions in a slum or shanty town—but also the rural community which has to cope with having many fewer productive adults. In both types of

communities the families which are coping with such rapid change undoubtedly still have the best interests of their children at heart but in many ways they are overwhelmed by the consequences of the change and find that accepted childrearing habits and previously held values are no longer operational. Any attempt to intervene on behalf of the children being raised in these contexts must focus on helping parents with their adapting skills. The starting point of such an effort will be what the parents already know and practice in raising their children. Arguments can no doubt be made for the introduction of different childrearing techniques and strategies to help meet the new goals and the unfamiliar exigencies of modern life. However the solutions cannot be totally foreign to the families and communities responsible for the raising of the children. Caretakers have parenting skills which are based on what their culture has taught them about parenting; thus they innovate and adapt their childrearing practices from the starting point of their own culture. Young parents who find themselves in an unfamiliar situation need support not only from the outside but also from knowledgeable adults of their own culture. Certain positive traditional practices which are perhaps no longer being encouraged might need to be reinforced. And since each culture has its own particular childrearing customs as well as its own beliefs and attitudes to uphold these, programs to aid child development and to educate caretakers must take into account this diversity and must be adapted to the different childrearing goals and ideals of each culture within the country or region.

The Diversity of West African Cultures

In the following discussion we will make sweeping statements such as "many West African cultures" or "in most West African societies". It is obvious that there are certain similarities among cultures that live within contiguous geographical zones. However, we would not want to overemphasize the homogeneity of West African societies. There are far-reaching parameters which underline very basic differences, and which, at the very least, must be taken into consideration when planning educational programs: Islamic vs. Christian vs. traditional religions; patrilineal vs. matrilineal social organization; agricultural vs. pastoral societies; and forest vs. savannah vs. sahelian ecological zones, to name only the most obvious. In each country research must be carried out to discover the different elements which are important for understanding childrearing practices. The following discussion is not intended to obliterate diversity, but rather to provoke questions in looking for it.

Early Prevention Instead of Later Intervention

The first-two years of a child's life are as crucial for mental development as they are for physical development. When traditional childrearing practices no longer efficiently correspond to modern realities, or when a breakdown in the social structure of the family or community prevents caretakers from following their best instincts and normal practices, the child receiving deficient child care is at risk not only of encountering obstacles to his physical development, but also of being deprived of adequate conditions for healthy psychosocial development. Preventing deprivation during this important early childhood period makes "recuperation" unnecessary later on in the child's life. Assuring that parents are as aware of the psychosocial needs of their children as they are of their physical needs means that the generation of care-givers who are making the transition from a "traditional" familiar family context to a "modern" sometimes

unfamiliar, always evolving context will still be able to produce psychologically healthy children. Strengthening the parenting process at this early stage will hopefully reduce the requirement for remedial programs later on in the child's life.

"Universal" Evaluation of Child Development

It is not, however, as easy to assess psychosocial development, and deprivation, as it is to assess physical development. Universal grids for the measurement of child development have essentially been created using data taken from non-African societies. And much of the cross-cultural research on child development undertaken in Africa has as its primary purpose to corroborate or refute theories based on Western childrearing practices and ideals. Growth charts and other testing devices do exist for determining physical development by evaluating the health and nutrition status of a child, and these are considered to be universally applicable. However, at present, there are few tests or other devices, which can yield indicators of child psychosocial development that are not culturally biased.

The various measuring devices and scales which are held to indicate psychosocial developmental milestones of the normal child are all the result of research done in the West, through observation and testing of Western children, and as such they use categories and concepts of development which are deeply rooted in Western cultural traditions. Although attempts are being made to reorient research and to rethink basic categories and concepts so that new scales of normal child development can be constructed that apply to non-Western societies, current testing devices must not be accepted and adopted as universally appropriate screening tools. Similar criticism can be levied against standard IQ tests (i.e., devices for testing levels of intelligence), which are culturally weighted and culturally biased for middle-class Western society and thus are inappropriate for testing children outside that rather narrowly defined culture.

The Identification of the Child whose Psychosocial Development is "At Risk"

If it is not possible, using standardized measuring devices, to accurately determine deficiencies in psychosocial development, then how is it possible to identify families and communities who might need help in this area? How can children be identified who are disadvantaged or deprived psychologically or socially? An obvious attempt to find an answer lies in drawing a parallel between physical development and psychosocial development. According to this thinking, the child who is at risk physically is probably also at risk psychologically and socially. Just as prolonged and persistent threats to his physical development lead to deficits which, as they accumulate, become harder and harder to overcome, so unfavorable environments, where the child's basic needs are not met, result in the cumulative effects of psychological and social deficits such that a child has a difficult task in catching up and later realizing his full potential in the modern world. This view, we would argue, is potentially erroneous since in many cases the parallel cannot be drawn.

There are generally accepted and rather clear notions of what constitutes a child who is at risk nutritionally and medically: he is undernourished, he is ill, and he does not measure favorably to expected standards for growth. Such notions, although differing in detail from culture to culture,

can be considered universal. In any culture of the world a parent has defined notions with which he distinguishes between the health or sickness of a child, between one who is growing well and one who is not. There are terms for illness in all languages, and usually there are concepts for illnesses typical of childhood. Sometimes, indeed, there are concepts and terms which correspond closely to a Western, biomedically defined state of malnutrition. All parents everywhere are conscious of symptoms of illness and disease, although similar symptoms may be interpreted and diagnosed differently in different cultures. What is considered to be a symptom of illness in one culture may not necessarily be so in another. In many West African cultures, for instance, a depressed fontanelle is considered to be a symptom of a serious neo-natal illness. In Western medicine, the explanation is rather that a depressed fontanelle is a symptom of dehydration, often due to excessive liquid loss through diarrhea. Similarly, in Western biomedical terms the excessive crying of a newborn suggests a physical ailment, whereas for a Baule (Cote d'Ivoire) mother it is more likely to suggest that the infant has come from the "other-world" with a message which needs to be interpreted by a specialist.

Nevertheless, Western science, which advances the universal biological basis of illness and malnutrition, has been able to claim that its testing devices and scales of normality for physical development are universally applicable and non-biased for cultural categories. It is possible to unequivocally determine if a child is sick or undernourished and to describe the conditions that led to these states. Environments can be identified which, because of biological stress and the failure to satisfy the basic physical needs of the child, threaten his development. Out of this theoretical paradigm comes a very clear notion of the child who is physically "at risk", who is disadvantaged or deprived, and it is then a fairly straightforward matter to imagine the steps which need to be taken to counteract such deprivation and improve the health and nutrition conditions of "high risk" children.

The analogical error is made when the same economic and social parameters that typify the environment of the child physically at risk are used to predict the conditions in which children are psychologically and socially at risk. Demographic and economic statistics are used to demonstrate that pervasive poverty and harsh surroundings place a child's development in jeopardy. Experience has shown that there are associated parameters which taken together can be effectively used to predict the environment in which the high risk child will be found: low per capita income; unequal income distribution; low adult literacy rates; high infant mortality rates; low parental educational levels; and large numbers of children per family (among others). But these parameters cannot be blindly accepted to predict which children are at risk of being psychosocially disadvantaged. A child growing up in a rural community in an environment where his nutritional situation is precarious, where annual measles epidemics take their toll, where malaria and other parasitic diseases may be endemic, is correctly defined as a child physically "at risk". But if he is part of a family and a community which function in an integrated manner and which are intact and well-adapted to local ecological and social contexts, that child is probably not "at risk" in his psychosocial development. Yet middle-income children living in a clean, modern home in an urban center may be well-fed, immunized and free from disease without necessarily being in a situation that is positive for psychosocial development.

Healthy physical growth cannot simply be assumed to assure healthy psychosocial growth. This would appear to be especially true for children of educated, "elite", urban families in West Africa who are one generation removed from the traditional society in which it was not the nuclear family who was solely responsible for taking care of and socializing the child. Such parents may have no model for raising their children themselves but may have nevertheless abandoned, either deliberately or necessarily, traditional childrearing practices. In fact, low income urban families who are clustered in crowded slums may be able to create a situation for children which is more closely related to traditional practices, values, and social environment than the more prosperous urban families who live by themselves in relatively spacious, single family dwellings. There thus needs to be a new definition of the child who is "at risk" in the realm of psychosocial development.

Having made the point that we cannot equate the high risk environment for psychosocial development with the high risk environment for physical development, it is necessary to add that there is in fact often a correlation between the two. The health and nutrition status of a child has an effect, either adverse or positive, on his psychosocial development, and conversely, a child who is basically psychologically healthy and socially integrated into a family is able to overcome health handicaps much faster than a child whose psychosocial development is in jeopardy.

Childrearing Practices in West Africa

■ DEFINITION OF CHILDBEARING PRACTICES

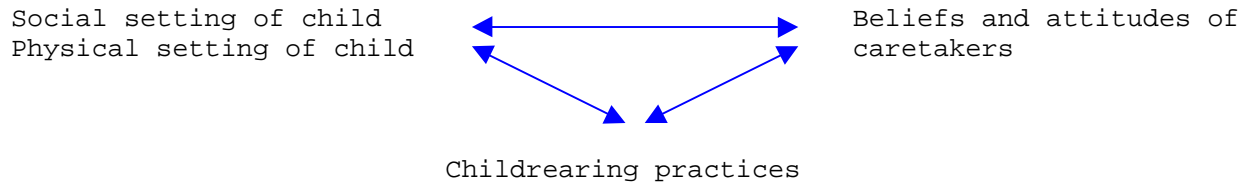
What do we mean by the childrearing practices of a given society or ethnic group? In effect we are talking about the customs used by members of that society in raising and taking care of their children. These customs are integrated into the everyday life of the society and not necessarily given conscious thought nor easily articulated. Rather they are often taken for granted. The explanation for a certain practice might be that it is inherently "natural" or "correct". Although there is obviously room for individual variation in the practice of social customs, we are talking about practices which are generally shared by the society as a whole. They can be seen as a society's answers to the problem of dealing with a child of a certain age in a given setting. In fact, they are strategies for responding to children's needs and for encouraging their development.

■ THE CONTEXT OF CHILDBEARING

In order to get a total picture of the strategies used in raising children in present-day West African societies we must look at not only how people have traditionally brought up children in a given culture, but also how practices have changed in response to diverse factors, such as the pressures of modern life, rural to urban migration, formal education, and greater participation of the parents in a cash economy. The examination of both the childrearing practices of a society and the change in these practices must focus on two other aspects of the total picture: a) the physical and social setting in which the child is brought up; and b) the attitudes and beliefs of his caretakers and the other adults of the society towards children and their care. Taking into consideration these other aspects helps us understand, on the one hand the adaptive function of certain childrearing practices in a given setting and, on the other hand, the reasons these

practices may be abandoned or changed when the setting changes or when attitudes and beliefs change.

TABLE 1*



*These three elements are similar to the three components of the "developmental niche", a theoretical framework developed by Super and Harkness for studying the cultural context of the micro-environment of the child (1987).

Physical environment. The immediate physical environment of the child clearly has a direct impact on certain childrearing practices. In hot climates where few clothes are worn there is often close skin-to-skin contact between mother and child. Some studies have sought to show that this creates a more intimate attachment bond between mother and child. In societies where food acquisition requires the mobility of the mother (or other caretakers) and the free use of the hands, babies are often carried on the back. Other physical aspects of the child's environment can have an impact on childrearing practices, such as a high prevalence of disease and parasites or the precariousness of the food supply. In many West African cultures children are expected to forage for "children's food": nuts, wild fruits, grubs, termites, mice, or small birds. They learn this behavior not from adults, but from other children. Although adults often do not consider these things to be "food," this does not alter the fact that they are important sources of nutrients for rural children and thus partially compensate for deficiencies in the diet provided by the caregivers. The difficulty in obtaining these items when the family lives in an urban context can have a potentially detrimental effect on the child's nutrition status, but is not consciously taken into account by the parents since they are often unaware of the important role such food plays in the child's diet.

Social environment. Equally important as the physical environment of the child is the social environment. The daily routine of a child takes place in a social setting peopled by members of the community. It is in recurrent interaction with these people that the child learns appropriate social behavior, that he discovers the need for and has the opportunity to practice certain behaviors. In short, it is the various elements of his social setting that give the child the essential information for the "acquisition of culture". It has been observed that in most African societies little importance is placed on verbal interaction between caretakers and young children, and much speculation has been put forth as to how this may affect the development of productive language competence and subsequent performance in school. However in a typical village setting,

and even in the urban situation to a certain extent, a young African child, hearing all day long the various intricacies of elaborate greeting systems and rule-governed speech events among the adults, learns at a very early age about subtle differences in social status and may master elements of the greeting system long before an American child knows how to say more than "Hello". The social environment of the typical African village child is rich in people and rich in experience. He is, in effect, constantly stimulated in his environment by interaction of many types. In addition to his parents, many adults have the right and responsibility to correct and encourage him; his peer group, which is large, with members coming and going, provides constantly changing stimuli. Contact with the next older generation of children, from whom are often recruited his caretakers, provides him with an important source of countless elements of culture (for instance, when to laugh, how to react to ridicule, how to forage for food, how to make slingshots, how to flirt with the opposite sex, etc.).

It is not necessarily the case that every one of these ecological and social factors must be taken into consideration when we examine a particular childrearing practice, but rather that any one of them might be important in understanding a given practice, its adaptive function for the society, and its vulnerability to change.

Beliefs and attitudes. The other element upon which we want to focus when we are examining childrearing practices involves the attitudes and beliefs of the caretakers. Whereas it might be true that most childrearing customs are uncritically practiced without individual rationalization, they are usually associated with specific, socially posited beliefs as to their significance. Each culture, for instance, has its own way of characterizing the stages of childhood and for defining characteristic behavior of each stage. In some West African societies a newborn is considered to be unable to see or to hear. Likewise, a young child who has relinquished his place on his mother's lap to his next younger sibling and joined the ranks of his peers may be considered ready to fend for himself and to participate in family chores. Adult members of the society will be able to articulate a certain number of principles that govern childrearing practices, or "explain" them in terms of what a properly brought up child should be like. For instance, a belief among certain Akan groups of Cote d'Ivoire and Ghana that some head shapes are more esthetically pleasing than others leads to manipulation and moulding of an infant's head.

However, not all attitudes and beliefs are explicit, and it is in looking at other aspects of the culture that one might find explanatory beliefs for a particular custom of childcare. Among certain ethnic groups of central Cote d'Ivoire, children are given daily enemas from birth onwards. When adults are asked for an explanation of this practice, they will variously say that it is to "wash out the insides" of the child, or that it is a way to administer medicines for different reasons. A few may say that it is done so that the child will not soil his caretaker. It is in understanding the attitude of the society to the dirtying nature of faeces that one obtains a clearer picture of the importance of controlling the defecation of an infant. Whereas, in these societies anyone may urinate in the village (behind a house or in a bath enclosure), and a baby's urinating on an adult is considered to bring good luck, all responsible children and adults have learned to leave the village in order to defecate. Children just learning this behavior are allowed to defecate on garbage middens, which are at the edge of the village, but nevertheless outside the village limits. Before a baby can learn this behavior his faeces are still considered to be dirtying,

and this accounts in part for the ritual of induced defecation by enemas. Among the Yoruba, on the other hand, both the urinating and the defecating of an infant on an adult are considered to be fortuitous (Sannoh 1986).

Universal behaviors and development processes in children do not provoke the same adult reactions in all societies. Rather these reactions are governed by interpretations based on the particular belief system of the society. Jerky hand movements of a newborn in response to a touch on the face may be seen as a sign of health and strength for an African mother, whereas an American mother might be concerned that the movement implied a worrisome lack of motor organization of the infant (Super 1986). Other neonatal research in Africa shows that some cultures consider newborns to be fragile and easily threatened by rough handling or stimulation, whereas other cultures see babies as hardy and not in need of special handling (de Vries and Super 1979; Dasen et al. 1978). Excessive newborn crying is considered by the Baule to be an attempt on the part of the spirit of the child to transmit a message from the other world from which he has just come. A diviner is thus engaged to interpret the message, which may concern the child himself (his identity, his name, his character, his taboos) or another member of the family (personal field notes).

It should be emphasized that the three elements outlined above, the childrearing practices of a community, the beliefs and attitudes of the caregivers and the social and physical environments of the child, are all closely interrelated. Specific customs reflect the constraints of the physical environment as well as the ideas held by the society as to the nature of the child and his capabilities. Take for instance breastfeeding, which is practiced throughout West Africa and for relatively prolonged periods. In pre-modern times, and in many rural communities today, a child was/is breastfed for periods of up to three years. Elements of the child's physical and social environment which are important in examining this practice are the unavailability of mother's milk substitutes or other baby food; the unavailability of technology to feed infants with something other than the breast (i.e., no feeding bottles); the constant availability of the mother who, even if working, is still accessible; and the presence of substitute caretakers, often young girls, who can follow the mother around and easily take the baby to the mother. A change in any of these components can have a direct effect on the practice of breastfeeding: the availability of cow's milk and feeding bottles; the mothers job-related absence from home; the caretaker not being able or willing to take the child to the mother, etc. Any of these changes can affect both the frequency and duration of breastfeeding.

The attitudes and beliefs of the mothers and other adults of the community are also important to look at in order to understand completely the role and importance of breastfeeding in the life of the infant and in the eyes of the society. Mother's milk, for example, may be considered to be the means by which certain spiritual or cultural essentials are passed on to the child. In many West African societies it is considered appropriate for grandmothers or other uterine kin (i.e., blood relatives of the mother) to also nurse the infant. Likewise it is usually considered "normal" that a baby have access to the breast at all times, even at night. It is obvious that a change in any of these beliefs and attitudes concerning breastfeeding, such as would come about through contact with other ways of life and in contexts other than the traditional village setting, would contribute toward changing the practice.

■ STAGES OF CHILDHOOD

Each culture has a specific way of dividing up the phases of childhood, and although different stages may not be explicitly named, they may well be recognized and talked about in terms of respectively appropriate behaviors attached to each one. In many West African societies, child developmental stages are not directly tied to chronological age. The child is rather described by his development: he walks; he talks; he has teeth; he knows how to carry a message; he is responsible; he knows the truth. The child is seen as what he is at that moment, not what he should be because he is a certain age. An Igbo proverb says: "A child learns by taking one step at a time and with patience he will eventually get there" (Makoju 1986). There may be great cultural significance attached to the passing from one stage to another which will be expressed in elaborate rites or initiation ceremonies.

Stages of childhood are not the same in every society. Among the Baule a newborn infant is referred to as banoman or "unripe child." At about three or four months the child then enters the stage referred to as bakan, "small child," where he remains until he is considered developed enough to be called simply ba "child." This usually occurs when he is around the age of five or six or when he is considered responsible enough to carry out errands and be trusted to tell the truth. At puberty, girls become talua "maiden," and boys become gbaflen, "youth".

■ THE PSYCHOSOCIAL NEEDS OF A YOUNG CHILD

One of the truths held to be universal by specialists in child development is that there are certain fundamental needs which should be met in any society and in any context in order to ensure the complete and healthy psychological growth of a child. These are: a need for attachment (to create a strong bond with the mother or other primary caretaker); a need for physical and intellectual stimulation; a need for security (to live in familiar, consistent and predictable surroundings); and a need for exploration (to try out new things, to play) (Myers and Landers, ms.).

In investigating the childrearing practices of a given social group, it is important to explore each of these areas to discover how the needs are met, for this can be very different from group to group. And we would claim that in established, well-functioning societies these needs are adequately met, given that society's goals and expectations for what constitutes a properly socialized adult. In modern day Africa, however, with expectations and goals undergoing rapid change, and social groups being radically redefined, these four basic needs are perhaps not always adequately met. Considerable cross-cultural research has been devoted to the study of how childrearing practices of non-Western societies satisfy these needs. For instance, two of these themes, attachment and stimulation, have received considerable attention because of remarkable differences between African and Western societies in these areas. And discussions of potential deficiencies in the childrearing practices of African communities often focus on a lack of certain kinds of stimulation or encouragement of exploration. We will examine certain childrearing practices which correspond to each of these needs, taking into account the cultural rationale and context of the practices.

Maternal attachment and alternate caretakers. One of the most important needs of the young child is an early psychological bonding or attachment to his mother or primary caregiver. Psychologists tell us that this first relationship is crucial in the development of feelings of security, trust in other people, and a sense of self-worth. The child builds his expectations and strategies for subsequent relationships upon his relationship with his first primary caretaker. The corollary to this theory is that the absence of a strong, caring relationship in the first months of life may jeopardize the child's later social and psychological development or even impair his intellectual curiosity.

What do we mean by attachment, and what are considered to be the required behaviors necessary to promote successful attachment? Attachment is usually defined as a close psychological bond between the infant and the mother which is a result of constant caring, the exchange of affection, and a close loving relationship. Admittedly this definition and the theory it reflects are based mainly on observation of Western families, but research in different parts of Africa has shown that perturbations in the development of attachment do create maladjusted, troubled children who are lethargic and fail to develop either curiosity or socially interactive skills. Thus to the extent that all human babies have a basic need for a primary attachment relationship in order to develop into successfully socially integrated adults, we can assume that each society has its own child caring customs and attitudes which promote attachment.

Much has been written about the closeness of the mother-child bond in African societies: breast-feeding on demand; sleeping together, usually in skin-to-skin contact, for the first year of life; and the constant availability of the mother for the child. These behaviors and others are said to promote unusually strong attachment between the child and his mother. Yet many researchers and writers, both African and non-African, have pointed out an apparently detached attitude that many African societies have towards newborns. An examination of some of the beliefs and practices concerning new-borns is necessary to understand this seeming incongruity.

It has been stressed by many Western child development specialists that the first few moments after birth are already important for the initial attachment between infant and mother. They thus suggest the immediate placing of the newborn on the mother's chest and putting him to the mother's breast as soon as possible after birth. However, in many West African societies, the newborn infant is laid to one side (on a mat or cloth) while the mother is tended to, and is not paid much attention until the placenta has been delivered and the mother is considered to be out of danger. During a Baule birth personally observed by the author, two babies were allowed to die, undoubtedly in part because of inattention (both were small, had trouble breathing and were lying uncovered on the cold, bare earth during a dry season morning) because the mother had not yet delivered the placenta. After an hour and a half of ineffective massage, pushing and pulling, local medicines and much dialogue with the spirit world, the mother was finally put on a bush-taxi for the local health center, an hour away. The babies were wrapped up and sent along but they were dead on arrival. It might be added that for the Baule, unlike some other West African societies, the birth of twins is a positive event with few negative overtones. They were not left to die because they were twins but rather because the life of the mother was in danger.

To make sense of such an event one must understand the attitudes and beliefs of a society concerning childbirth and newborns. Although this may seem to be outside the scope of an examination of childrearing practices, these beliefs form the basis for attitudes and behaviors in caring for the young child. Many anthropological analyses of pre-industrial societies have pointed out the pervasive dichotomy that exists between nature and culture, between that which is untamed, wild and non-human, but basic to life, and that which is structured, man-made and governed by social rules. The female/male dichotomy fits this scheme by equating man with culture and woman with nature. Men are the ones who tame nature, who make social rules, who keep the peace, who are the caretakers of the society. Women, in their basic role as life-givers, are in close harmony and contact with nature. They are the primordial connection between nature and the society (culture) of man (Ravenhill 1976). Many customs and beliefs point to this association of women with nature. There are often special rules limiting contact between men and women during menstruation, a period when a natural function makes a woman socially unacceptable. Among the Baule Kode the secret rituals of cleaning and maintaining the life-giving water hole (outside the village limits, that is, in nature) is exclusively the domain of women and cannot be attended by men on pain of death. Among many Akan groups of Cote d'Ivoire, in times of calamity, the most powerful ritual, used when all the men's rituals are considered to be ineffective, involves women parading through the village in their natural state, nude. Men are excluded on pain of death. Women also often play essential roles in customs and rituals surrounding death and burial-the end connection of humans with nature (personal field notes).

In many West African cultures childbirth is often considered to be a very dangerous time for the woman, one in which she is in direct contact with the unpredictability and uncontrollability of nature. In some societies (Guro, Baule, Senufo, Yoruba, Ashanti) a woman traditionally gave birth in a special place, sometimes the women's bath enclosure, at or just outside the village limits, that is, in the domain of nature rather than culture. The Baule have a euphemism for childbirth: "She has gone to (a place) between life and death." The outcome is never sure. The important thing is that she return safely. Whether she returns with an infant or not is almost secondary. She can always try again. As a Ghanaian proverb puts it, "It is better to save the pot than to break the pot in attempting to save the water it contains."

And so the unborn infant may be seen as a potential danger, a threat to the mother. This is not to say of course that the child is in any sense unwanted, for throughout Africa adults from any traditional society will often say that it is good to have many children, that children are the wealth and security of a family, endowing the parents with prestige and the ability to command respect in the community, as well as being an economic asset. In some cultures, spread in an area from central Cote d'Ivoire to Nigeria, an especially high value is placed on having ten children, there being special festive rituals on the birth of the tenth child, who is sometimes given a special name. Among the Guro a special rite has to be performed for a woman who has born her tenth child before she can become pregnant with the eleventh. Children are considered to come from God (a pre-Christian, creator God) in most West African cultures and he will keep sending them to a family until something goes wrong (intervention of ancestors, malevolent spirits, illness) or until he decides the woman has born enough (menopause).

Thus the birth of a child, although desired and celebrated, is not without potential complications. The newborn is seen as a stranger who does not earn acceptance simply by nature of being born. He has to prove, by acting like a "normal" baby, that he is a human being and not a changeling. In the world view of many West African cultures the newborn comes from another world peopled by ancestors, by spirits, by the unborn and the dead. Because he is just newly arrived from the spirit world, he often brings with him messages (which are to be interpreted from his cries by a diviner). These may concern someone in the family and once they are transmitted the matter is finished. But they may also concern the special identity of the child himself, in which case he is saddled at an early age with expectations (positive or negative) as to his character and its associated behavior. The newborn is also considered to be able to directly transmit bad luck to the family from the spirit world in the form of serious illness, death or other calamity. This is especially true for infants born in unusual circumstances. Thus for the Yoruba in former times, the survival of both twins was considered to predict the death of a close family member. Among the Baule (and other Akan societies of Cote d'Ivoire and Ghana) certain newborns were not allowed out of the wash enclosure (the birthing place) but were put to death by the birth attendants. These included infants born with deformities (including teeth), or infants of the opposite sex of the two preceding siblings.

The early days of an infant's life are considered tenuous. The ancestors or spirits can recall him at any moment. Among the Igbo in former times, twins were thrown away in the bush because it was a sign that evil spirits wished the family ill luck and were seeking vengeance for concealed evil deeds by the parents or family members. In cases such as these the mothers may refuse to look at their newborns, not out of cruelty but because nature has a definite course and anything to the contrary is an abomination (Omali, quoted in Manley 1968).

After this initial stage of uncertain attachment to life, which is often accompanied by a certain distance and noninvolvement on the part of the mother and other caretakers, infants in most West African societies are showered with attention and affection. There is usually a special ceremony which marks the end of the first week of life, although among some societies the initial period is four days for girls and three days for boys. The ceremony is not always elaborate in all societies, but usually does include the coming out of seclusion of the mother and infant, and the naming of the child. After this official acceptance into the society of mankind expenses are not spared to buy perfumes, powders, magic potions or amulets to keep the child in good health. Whereas older siblings may not be clothed, young infants often will be smartly dressed. The infant is passed around among many caring adults, fondled and admired by the whole family. As one Nigerian writer has noted, the babies are fondled, cuddled and kissed more freely than in western societies (Sannoh 1986). The child's cries are immediately tended to. A Wan mother cannot wander far from her infant without someone (usually a man) yelling to her "Your child is calling!" In some societies, the Ebie for instance, a mother is excused from participation in normal daily activities during the first three months of her child's life. Her exclusive activities are to eat, sleep and tend to her child (personal field notes). In other, less indulgent, societies the new mother may be expected to resume her agricultural activities, although perhaps in a limited manner for the first few months after childbirth.

In most West African societies, the child is breastfed on demand and sleeps with his mother, who can no longer sleep with her husband out of respect for the very widespread custom of post-partum sexual abstinence. The new mother is not allowed sexual activity until, in some societies, the child walks or, in others, until the child is weaned. (Each culture has its manner for explaining this taboo, but the most commonly stated reason is that sexual intercourse contaminates the mother's milk and causes the nursing child to become very ill). All-night breastfeeding on demand and constant daytime contact with a caretaker has a direct effect on the sleep patterns of infants. Research by Super and Harkness with Kipsigis infants has shown that while the average longest bout of sleeping during a 24-hour period is eight hours for American infants of four months, Kipsigis babies sleep for no more than an average of four hours at a time through the age of eight months. Furthermore the total amount of sleep during a 24-hour cycle for the African and American babies differed markedly by the age of four months, with the African babies sleeping on the average two hours less. These data have interesting implications for "universal" claims that the infant brain needs a certain amount of sleep time for proper development (Super and Harkness 1982).

In traditional West African societies infants are weaned relatively late. Two to three years of breastfeeding is considered the norm for societies in Senegal, in Nigeria, or in Central African Republic, to cite a few examples. For the Guro the ideal length of time for breastfeeding is still two and a half years, although women say that in former times weaning took place even later (Tafforeau and Timyan 1987). Much has been made of the fact that in some West African societies weaning is very abrupt, the family deciding from one day to the next that the child should no longer be breastfed. The child to be weaned is sometimes sent away from the mother; in other societies he is given bitter medicine when he wants to nurse, in yet others he is scolded and rejected by the mother. For many researchers these abrupt weaning practices are held to have a direct and lasting impact on the mother-child attachment bond. According to some this contributes to widespread dependence behavior and fixation on the mother by West African children and adults (Erny 1972). It should be pointed out, however, that a) weaning is not abrupt in all West African societies and b) that the child may continue to have access to the breast after formal weaning has occurred (Wolof: Zempleni-Rabain 1962, Baule and Guro: personal field notes).

The overall picture of early infant nurturing in West Africa is one of indulgence and strong attachment between mother and child, and this is confirmed over and over again in the literature on West African societies. Some researchers have pointed out, however, that such indulgence is counteracted by a pattern of "casual nurturance" (Levine 1963) in which African mothers are typified as having a noticeable lack of anxiety and emotional intensity in their nurturing habits. The notion that the mother is expected to be the exclusive caretaker of a young child is virtually non-existent in traditional West African societies. The baby belongs to the family, and from the day of birth throughout his childhood he will have surrogate mothers and even surrogate breasts to take care of him. After the first crucial period of assuring that the newborn infant stays in this world (from three months to six months) the child is left for longer and longer periods with other caretakers, often young girls (but also older women) in the family. Another factor which is seen by some as exhibiting casual nurturance is an allegedly off-hand attitude towards feeding the child. Breastfeeding is done at any moment, in any position, and the young child often feeds

amidst much noise, jostling and commotion. Once the child is considered able to eat he might be given a small portion of food to eat by himself without ceremony or encouragement, or even left to fend for himself around a common pot with his older siblings. Even though in a few societies (the Banda or the Egba, for instance) there is a traditional notion of providing special foods for babies, in many societies the child is given adult food as soon as he can chew, although his portions may often consist mainly of the starch staple of the diet with very little protein or vegetable, these being reserved for adults.

In traditional societies this pattern of casual nurturance could be seen as determined by the necessity of the mother to participate in the food-acquiring activities of the family. But as it is an integrated part of the attitudes towards infant and child care it is still intact in the current modern situation. So that even in an urban context, where markets and a cash economy give some mothers greater leisure time, one sees the same pattern of leaving the child with a caretaker. Even in low income urban families mothers may use any number of different strategies (bringing a sister or niece from the village, "hiring" immigrant girls, using the services of a neighbor) to have a caretaker for their children. And studies (Lloyd 1970) have shown that among the non-working mothers of the "elite" Nigerian class there is only a superficial shift away from these traditional patterns of reliance on surrogate caretakers.

Stimulation in early infancy. As important as the subject of mother-child attachment and security in West African societies is the subject of early infancy stimulation. The manner in which African infants are handled often involves much sensoral stimulation. Carrying a child on the back or on the hip with skin-to-skin contact involves stimulation of many kinds. The vigorous bathing which an infant undergoes in certain West African societies is a totally stimulating experience. Throughout Africa infants sleep next to (in skin-to-skin contact with) the mother, and when they no longer sleep with the mother they sleep in close contact with another family member, usually a sibling.

Carrying an infant on the back, supported by a piece of cloth, or carrying him on the jugged-out hip (held in the crook of the arm) is common throughout Africa. Backcarrying is used not only as a way to travel with the child (a built-in baby carriage) but also as a means of childcare. A fussy child may be put on the back to calm him or an active child may be put on the back to keep him out of trouble. As a Wolof proverb says, "The mother's back is the baby's medicine." A study of Kipsigis society (Super 1981) showed that backcarrying was used for 17 percent of an infant's daytime care. In addition, the infants were being carried on someone's hip or being held for an additional 12 percent of the day. With all the other childcaring activity, these infants were observed to be lying down for only about 10 percent of their waking hours. (For comparative purposes this is contrasted to an American urban sample where infants spend 30 percent of their waking hours lying down.) Not only does being carried on the back or the hip provide constant tactile stimulation through skin-to-skin contact with the carrier, it also requires the infant to constantly exercise his muscles in order to compensate for the body movements of the one carrying him. In addition, since the infant accompanies his caretaker wherever she goes during the day and thus observes all aspects of her daily routine, there is a high level of visual stimulation and a wide variety of visual patterns for him to interact with.

In some West African societies the bathing routine which infants undergo is highly stimulating. Among the Baule, from the first day of life, a child is given a bath twice a day. The whole bathing process is very elaborate and becomes a sort of ritual, starting with an enema to clean out the bowels. (Enemas are also given to administer medicine.) The infant is scrubbed vigorously, using hot water, lots of soap and a vegetable sponge. The head is especially well scrubbed. Little attempt is made to calm the screaming child or to keep soap and water out of his eyes and mouth. Halfway through the bath, cool drinking water is administered by closing off the nose and forcing the child to swallow or "inhale" the water. The infant typically reacts with shocked stiffening of the body and even more vigorous crying. He is put to the breast for calming only after the mother has thus washed and rinsed him twice. Unlike any other time during the child's day, when crying leads to instant pacification and the mother who does not react fast enough is scolded by the men of her family, crying during bath time bothers no one. If the infant is being bathed, his most insistent, vigorous screaming will get no reaction from any adult, male or female. After the bath, the baby is massaged, his hips and shoulders manipulated and stretched, and his head pressed and molded. He is then rubbed with creams and powders, daubed with perfumes and kaolin and his hair is combed. During the manipulation stage of the toilette the infant is typically calm and wide-eyed and after the whole ritual is finished and he is clothed and given by the mother to a family member to hold, the general impression one gets is of a very alert, active, and awake but completely calm infant. (For comparative purposes we can oppose this routine to the gentle, calm, supposedly soothing, bath that Western mothers give their newborns which tends to leave the babies sleepy and lethargic, or sometimes tense and fussy.)

One positive effect of a large amount of physical stimulation is enhanced psychomotor development. It has been found by researchers working in many different African societies that there is a marked precocity in psychomotor development among African children as compared to "norms" established by the study of Euro-American children. These findings are based on testing behavior such as motor head control, eye-hand coordination, sitting, standing and walking, where African children reach these developmental landmarks earlier than Western children. Although there are varied explanations posited for this psychomotor advance among African children, the factor which is most often cited is increased levels of sensory stimulation such as has been described above. Another consideration is that African children do not have to contend with a large amount of restrictive clothing. Sometimes overlooked as contributing factors are the attitudes of adults in a given society to the development of specific motor behavior. In many West African societies the ability of the child to walk is very socially significant since it is at this point that the mother can resume sexual relations. Much verbal play between men and women concerning a child not yet walking alludes to the day the child will walk and when the status of the mother will return to that of being a sexual partner. This engenders much encouragement and support of the child's motor development, to the extent that certain behavior is specifically taught and children are coaxed into practicing it often. But again this is a cultural phenomenon, since focus is placed on those activities seen as contributing to walking ability. Among the Baule, sitting up is considered to be an important landmark towards the desired goal of walking in a way that crawling is not. Young infants are thus placed in a sitting position, their legs spread apart, their hands placed on the ground for support and balance, with occasionally a rolled up cloth on one side for additional support. As the Baule say, "A sitting child will soon walk." No such encouragement or positive reinforcement is given to the child who crawls; rather, when a child

shows signs of independent locomotion, he is often given a "walker" to push around (a traditionally made 3-wheeled, T-shaped device).

In support of the idea that motor precocity has as much of a cultural component as a physical component, one study has pointed out that although there is a general overall precocity in psychomotor development in African infants, when specific behaviors are looked at separately there are some milestones that African children achieve at the same time or later than infants from Western cultures. Prone behaviors (such as lifting the head, turning over, and crawling) may not be particularly valued or encouraged, and there may be little opportunity for babies to practice them, in that they are rarely set down while awake. Thus in these specific behaviors, African babies do not exhibit the same degree of precocity that would be expected when general overall motor development is looked at (Super 1981).

Intellectual stimulation and exploration. As we have seen, the practices of many West African societies used in caring for infants provide them with much sensorial stimulation. But what about intellectual stimulation? As the child gets older his curiosity develops and his need for exploration is manifest. The observation has often been made that traditional childrearing practices in Africa do not consciously encourage curiosity and exploration on the part of the child and thus he may not receive the intellectual stimulation necessary to help him develop certain skills required for successful adaptation into today's world. It has been noted that adults in traditional West African societies do not endorse "play" as a beneficial pastime for their children and thus there is not the positive reinforcement or verbal encouragement of intellectual curiosity that one has come to expect in most modern Western societies. (Burdin n.d.; Erny 1972; Dasen et al. 1978).

The notion of "play" is assumed to be a universal concept by most child development specialists, but it is interesting to note that terms used in different languages for this concept do not always mean the same thing. In some West African languages the term for "play" is used to refer to organized games of competition that involve a degree of skill, or to singing and dancing games. A child who is engaged in an activity which might be considered, by Western observers, as exploration and manipulation of his environment out of curiosity and enjoyment (e.g., playing with sand, piling up stones, moving stools around to make an enclosure, creating toy vehicles or dolls), but which is not recognized as "play" by the culture, might be said to be "doing nothing". (Such is the case in Baule or Wan, two Ivoirian languages.) Analysts have observed that in these societies where there is little explicit value placed on exploration and curiosity there is an associated socialization process that discourages independence and the excessive asking of questions of adults. It is important, however, to take into consideration the whole context of the West African child's experience. In traditional societies he spends a good deal of his time in the presence of other, often older children, and his day is typically spent moving throughout the village and outside the village to the farms, engaging in all manner of activities which stimulate him to ask questions, to observe, to improvise solutions to problems, to create new "games." And what of the child who does not readily accept conformity but who exhibits a high degree of individuality and independence of thought, inventing new things or exhibiting precocity in some adult skill? In many societies he is considered to have something best translated as "ingenuity" or

"craftiness," and although somewhat marginal, he does get positive reinforcement for his individuality and initiative.

■ EARLY CHILDHOOD SOCIALIZATION

Having looked at a series of habits and attitudes involved in childcare from the point of view of the young child's needs, we will now consider three areas in which the socialization processes of most West African societies place great emphasis.

Respect and obedience. In West African societies a remarkable emphasis is placed on learning to be obedient and responsible. A comparison of worldwide socialization practices done in the 1980s showed that African societies as a whole differ significantly from societies in other areas of the world in two dimensions: the learning of obedience and the learning of responsible behavior (Doob 1985). In a Ghanaian study, most parents interviewed equated "bringing up a child" with "control and rigid discipline." To the majority of the parents interviewed, a child "should be seen rather than heard" and the child who asks many questions or engages in discussions with adults is considered to be exhibiting bad manners (Akwezi 1985). The child is taught at a very young age to do exactly as he is told without asking for an explanation. Among the Igbo, a mother or family member will give a baby a piece of yam or fruit and then ask for it back again; if the infant is reluctant to give it up, pressure is put on him to do it against his will. (Dilim Omali, quoted in Manley 1967).

Each culture has its way of defining a well-brought up child, and the terms that are used to describe the ideal child are significant. In some West African cultures (Ibgo, Yoruba, Baule, Attie, and Ebrie, to name a few), while there are no specific abstract terms meaning "obedient" or "responsible," there is a term used to refer to a child who exhibits these characteristics, a term that is best translated as "intelligent," and adults are able to cite the behavior which characterizes such a child. In one study, Yoruba mothers answered questions about well-behaved children with a number of specific behaviors: doing tasks such as running errands, doing household chores, and performing personal tasks for oneself (e.g., washing and dressing oneself). Of these the one which was rated the most highly desirable in a well-behaved child was the running of errands. (Lloyd 1970)

One of the first responsibilities given to a young child in many West African societies is the running of errands. Practice for this important function starts as soon as a child can walk, at which time he is given objects to go and put in a specific place or to give someone in a very deliberate attempt to teach him to obey instructions. As soon as the child can talk he is given messages to transmit and errands to run in another part of the village or in another household. These get more and more complicated as he grows older, but he is always expected to carry them out seriously. A child who fails to perform such tasks successfully is belittled and ridiculed by his peers as well as by adults. He thus learns at an early age that older members of the family and the community depend on him to be honest, responsible and efficient in carrying out duties.

Expectations such as these often change when the structure of the family changes or when the aspirations of the parents for their children change. A study comparing traditional and modern childrearing practices in Nigeria (Lloyd 1970) pointed out that traditional mothers expected

immediate, unilateral obedience from their children, whereas "elite" mothers expected qualified obedience, taking into account the nature and urgency of the request and excusing a disobedient child because he might not as yet understand what is expected of him. Other studies have shown that caretakers in traditional societies employ corporal punishment much more frequently as a way of enforcing obedience than do families who are no longer integrated into a traditional context. Caretakers from this latter group rely more on dialog and reasoning with the child to make him comply (Levine 1967).

In general children in West African societies tend to learn by doing rather than by having things explained to them. They are expected to pick up a skill or a proper behavior by observation and practice rather than by formal instruction. Ridicule is an important method of social control in these societies and is applied even to the young child. Some researchers have found that typically an African child is more sensitive to ridicule than a European child. This could be one of the factors responsible for the African child's learning to do things well in a relatively short time, knowing that if his product or performance is comparatively below expected standards, his peers will not spare him their tongues.

Dependence vs. Independence. It has been pointed out by many that traditional West African societies place great value on dependent behavior and do not encourage social independence (Burdin n.d.; Oppong 1973; Sannoh 1986; Shelton 1968, among others). It is not uncommon for peoples who live in small agricultural or pastoral communities to be interdependent in their relationships with one another, and West African societies are not an exception. Relationships of dependence permeate the culture; for instance, in Igbo society there is a clear notion of a hierarchy of power, from the ancestors, who exist perpetually in the spiritual realm, down to the elders of the lineage, to the younger men and women and finally to the children. Each rank possesses powers over the one below, enforcing social rules and demanding respect and proper carrying out of duties (Shelton 1968). This is not unlike many other West African societies, although the degree of institutionalization of the authority hierarchy differs from culture to culture. The child is on the bottom of the heap in the social structure but he is also very important since he is the one who will support and perpetuate the power relationship of his parents and grandparents when they become ancestors. All members of the society are thus part of a hierarchy of dependence, and the childrearing practices teach and reinforce this. Older children are responsible for the care of younger ones, and thus children have the experience of being both dependent in an ascending line upon those older than they, and of being responsible, in descending order, for those younger than they. As has been pointed out for the Yoruba, children come to view growing up as a process of progressive relief from menial tasks and of increasing authority to pass these tasks on to others. Maturity increases a child's status in the dependency hierarchy, and higher status means getting others to do things for you (Levine 1966).

The maintenance of the dependency relationship is in some ways made the child's responsibility. Once he is old enough to keep up with his caretaker(s) without having to be carried, it is he who must take the initiative to accompany them since, in many village societies, the mother or other caretaker may not manifest overt anxiety about whether the child is following her. The child must follow his caretaker, or later, his band of friends, or he will find himself alone. The responsibility for maintenance of the relationship between elder and youngster therefore is placed

at an early age upon the shoulders of the child, for if he fails to maintain close contacts with his group he will lose his sense of belonging, his bodily security, and his right to emotional comfort in times of distress. To avoid the trauma of isolation he observes closely his peers and elders, learning the coping techniques of his culture. Throughout his life's experience the child will find himself constantly dependent upon forces greater than he—the elders, the ancestors, the gods—and his success will depend upon his adaptation to external forces (Shelton 1968).

It can be said that all children everywhere have to contend with superior forces and are dependent on their elders. However, modern-day Western cultures tend to draw a sharp distinction between being a child and being an adult. Children have their own manufactured objects, their own food, their own parties, their own culture. Heavy pressure is exerted by the society to become an independent, self-reliant individual who takes initiative and stands up against pressure to conform. "Manliness" and "adulthood" are made synonymous with independence and solitary individualism. Western children then are obliged to undergo a major transformation from being naturally dependent to being independent, although at the same time there is an attempt to inculcate the need to behave as involved, responsible members of the community in which they live. A child growing up in a traditional West African society recognizes the importance of knowing one's place within the family and society and fulfilling it satisfactorily. Independence of spirit is usually not taken seriously or is frowned upon. In many African societies a person desiring "privacy," engaging in "secret" behavior, or consistently refusing to share (food, objects, news, feelings) is immediately suspect and is open to criticism or more severe penalties. All experiences are expected to be shared with the community at large, and thus one has not only the right to call upon one's neighbors for needed help but one also has the responsibility to share with them, even if only symbolically, the good things that one receives.

As one African writer has put it, traditional education among the Yoruba emphasizes suppression of the quest for individual autonomy while promoting the quest for social values.

The goal is not that the child should discover himself and be what he has in him to be, but rather that he should achieve if at all possible a culturally defined and expected norm, a correct way of being in society. The worst thing is for a child to turn out to be irresponsible and lazy, a tattler or a non-respecter of others or of others' belongings. These traits are considered to be anti-social. (It should be noted that although there are very strong sanctions on stealing in most, if not all, African societies, the notions of property and ownership and rights to the belongings of certain other people is not the same from culture to culture. Thus what is considered "stealing" in one society is not necessarily so in another.) No parent wants the terms "born but not trained" or "taught but does not learn" used to describe his child (Sannoh 1986).

Communicative skills. Another area of great emphasis in the training of children throughout West Africa is language and communication. It has been observed by many researchers (Gay and Cole 1967; Levine 1974; Harkness 1975) that in traditional African cultures, mothers and other adults do not make a conscious effort to speak often to their infants with the intent of teaching them how to communicate, and that there is not the same degree of awareness as in Western societies of encouraging a child to express himself. This has sometimes been used as an explanation for the extreme timidity and inability of traditionally raised African children to

perform well, not only in school, but also in testing situations which require them to speak to adults. According to one study (Harkness 1975) the emphasis in language socialization is on comprehension rather than production, much of the speech of adults to toddlers being in the form of commands. As the child leaves the permissiveness and indulgence of infancy, adults' verbal interactions with him become more directive and more negative, and the total amount of attention he receives from adults decreases. This points to an important aspect of communicative competence in many African societies: silence when in the presence of older or higher status people. This behavior is carried over to adulthood and is difficult to alter. As one Ghanaian author has pointed out, it is a sign of respect for a child to address an elder but he must learn how to do so correctly, and the conversation must be as short as possible (Akvesi 1985).

These attitudes to speech production should not be taken to mean however that children raised in traditional West African societies are disadvantaged in language acquisition or in productive competence. It is true that there may be a certain social distance between generations characterized by a lack of spontaneous verbal interaction, a quiet, even impassive demeanor on the part of a younger person, and sometimes even an avoidance requirement. These speech behaviors would be expected in societies which place a heavy emphasis on responsibility and obedience, and much research bears this out (Munroe and Munroe 1972; Whiting and Whiting 1974). One must not forget however that these are also societies which place a heavy emphasis on the development of verbal skills in almost every area of daily life.

In societies which do not have a written language (and virtually all traditional West African societies fall into this category) verbal competence is highly valued. There is no written history, no body of recorded legal precedents, no written literature, no postal system. The spoken word is taken very seriously, and competence in verbal expression is an essential skill. In many West African languages there are a large number of terms to refer to ways of transmitting information, both correctly and incorrectly, many more than there are in English. In some Ghanaian societies the first advice which is given to a newborn child-after the customary touching of the umbilical cord to the child's lips-is that the child keeps its mouth shut. In other words, he should not become a babbler; his words should be significant and what he says should have meaning (Akvesi 1985).

Children are thus trained early to carry messages and to transmit them faithfully, without distortion and without personal involvement, for this is an important link in the social interaction of the community. The child thereby learns the role of "interpreter" and intermediary, a principle role in societies where few important conversations take place without an official witness. In time, the child learns about the manipulation of information and the possibility of control of the communicative act, skills that will serve him well in an oral society. Every adult should be able to perform in giving evidence in court cases, in telling stories, in posing riddles, in using proverbs, in recounting histories, in mediating palavers, and the person who does these things with eloquence and elaborateness receives much praise. In addition most languages throughout West Africa have elaborate greeting systems and children are expected to start learning these at a young age. An Akan or a Yoruba child, if he is brought up according to traditional custom, is required to start out his day with the proper greeting to the members of his

family, accompanied, in the case of the Yoruba child, with the appropriate gesture, curtsy for girls, prostration for boys.

Children receive their verbal training by constant participation in adult life. They attend all social events, are usually required to serve the guests of the family, and accompany parents to group meetings. They are not usually allowed to participate verbally in adult gatherings, but practice of the observed verbal behavior can and does take place in their peer group. The importance of the language socialization function of child caretakers and peer playgroups should not be overlooked in traditional West African societies. Observation of Baule children's play reveals that much time is spent in practicing and exhibiting verbal prowess: telling of fables and stories, posing of riddles, singing of games and dance songs, carrying out of mock adult rituals, exchanging of elaborate and eloquent insults. Creativity and imagination are highly valued in these domains (personal field notes).

One other area which is often overlooked in discussing the language skills of most West African children is bilingualism or even multilingualism. In many traditional societies, adults are competent in more than one African language and function daily in bilingual situations, where in a given conversation between two people each person speaks his own language, each understanding the other. Children thus grow up hearing many languages and often have the opportunity to gain proficiency before they are adults. Given the increase in inter-ethnic marriages, more than one language may often be spoken in the child's household.

The Application of Data to Caretaker Education Programs

Data on childrearing practices such as have been discussed in this paper are invaluable for many aspects of developing programs for early childhood care. They can be used in the training of personnel for formal childcare facilities, in parent education seminars, in community-based action groups, to name just a few.

■ THE IMPORTANCE OF KNOWING HOW INFORMATION IS TRANSMITTED

In order to identify the audience who is to receive messages on child development it is essential to be aware of existing patterns of the transmission of knowledge and of responsibility for childcare. Which adults in a family or community have the right to intervene in the welfare of the child? Whose advice is sought for problems with children? What are the channels through which messages from the outside must pass in order to be accepted by the community? What are the cultural norms and expectations as to the appropriateness of discussion of certain topics with certain audiences? These must all be identified for a given society if we expect intervention and education to have a lasting effect.

■ THE EFFECT OF CHANGE ON THE CHILD'S SITUATION

The childrearing practices of any well functioning society are directed toward shaping the development of the child so that he will become a well-adjusted adult, with the abilities and skills necessary to function in the social and physical environment of that particular society. We have seen that, although we can talk about physical deprivation (inadequate nutrition, high

prevalence of disease, etc.) in traditional West African societies, we cannot necessarily assume psychosocial deprivation. The traditional childrearing practices of these societies are appropriate to promote healthy psychological development for the particular ecological and social context of that society. It is when the traditional lifestyle is confronted by rapid change that existing childrearing practices seem to be inadequate.

Having examined some of these childrearing customs, and having seen how appropriate these are to the ecological and social contexts of traditional cultures, we can now perhaps attempt an answer to the question: where can one expect to find the child who is potentially disadvantaged psychologically? Using the model which was discussed earlier for considering childrearing practices in terms of their integration into a culture's belief system as well the ecological and social context of the family, we can say that the child who is living in a situation where there is no longer harmony among these different elements may be psychologically or socially at risk. When the childrearing practices of a family, the social or physical setting in which the child is being raised, or the beliefs, attitudes and expectations of the society concerning the child's development have undergone a rapid change, a lack of synchronization may occur which produces a situation where the child is no longer being appropriately prepared for integration into adult life. Children raised in newly developed urban slums, in refugee camps, in traditional villages where half the adult population has emigrated, in isolated urban apartments, are sometimes victims of this lack of harmony.

We must keep in mind, however, that childrearing customs are adaptive. In evolutionary processes of change within a society, customs change gradually as the physical and social contexts change and as the belief system of the society changes. Practices are gradually selected and reinforced across generations and within generations as they adapt to change. A study of urban Nigeria showed that "elite" parents are more likely to use psychological techniques of discipline than corporal punishment because their attitudes towards children and children's education are different from those found in traditional society. Parents consider that their children need to be more independent and need to have considerably more inner resources than their peers in traditional contexts (Levine 1967). A practice is thus given up because of a change in attitude.

Another example serves to illustrate change in a custom due to a change in the child's physical context. In newly constructed villages in Cote d'Ivoire, where often three or four separate villages have been built together in one large conglomerate, many of the households in the middle of the village find themselves too far away from the edge of the village to oblige small children to go to the "bush" to defecate. They are thus allowed to use chamber pots behind the house for this function and do not get the normal strict Baule training about the dirtying nature of faeces until later in their development.

■ "GOOD" AND "BAD" PRACTICES

Societies which remain essentially intact can accommodate a certain number of changes without overly perturbing the healthy development of the child. What needs to be investigated are the new elements in today's societies, both rural and urban, which are fostering situations where we find psychosocially deprived or disadvantaged children. And in programmatic terms, solutions need to be sought which are sensitive to the individual cultures concerned. Whatever the

context, be it traditional village life or urban life, caretakers act constantly as mediators between the child and his surrounding environment. Caretakers, whether parents, kinfolk or community members, serve as a catalyst to the learning opportunities given to a child. Thus the specific behaviors used by caretakers in their roles as mediators will change in response to new sociological and ecological variables, but always as a function of a particular culture and its belief system. What is an appropriate adaptation in one culture is not necessarily considered appropriate in another. And because societies are changing, what was once considered a legitimate practice may no longer be seen as such. We must recognize that what is considered a "good" practice in one socio-cultural context may not be so considered in another. Careful attention must be paid to the cultural rationale for childrearing practices and their adaptive function for a given society in order to be able to identify those that are "positive," and therefore to be encouraged, as well as those that are "negative" and to be discouraged. Western notions of "good" and "bad" childrearing practices cannot be uncritically accepted. They must be juxtaposed to the reality of local cultures and to the reality of today's African families, doing their best to adapt to new information, new requirements for survival, and new expectations.

■ WHAT ARE THE STATED GOALS AND ASPIRATIONS OF A SOCIETY FOR ITS CHILDREN?

We must take a critical look at child development programs which are designed to introduce new ways of bringing up children. Before we assume that caretakers need help in adapting new techniques and strategies for child development to their particular situation we need to look at the underlying goals and expected outcomes of proposed early childhood development programs. In Western societies, parents and educators have in mind a certain goal when they encourage the early stimulation of their children. These children are being prepared for sixteen to twenty years (or more) of formal schooling, and will have, after that, a fair chance of being employed in one of thousands of different sectors in complex, highly industrialized societies. And since most Western parents have themselves received a formal education, the kind of training, stimulation and encouragement the child experiences in the home environment is similar to what he will experience at school.

The question must be raised: should the goals of early childhood development in Africa be conceived primarily, as they are in the West, in terms of later success in formal schooling?

In a region where currently 30 to 40 percent of the children do not go to school (African Development Bank 1986) is it valid to consciously introduce childrearing practices designed primarily to prepare children for formal education which is developed from a Western model? In what other ways can we begin to think about the measurement of childhood psychosocial development? What is child development in preparation for? What constitutes "successful" psychosocial development, and why?

We would argue that it is important to look carefully at the skills necessary for successful integration into the adult social and economic life of today's societies before we establish child development programs. The goals need to be tailored to the realities—the strengths, the potentials—of African societies. They should encourage the intellectual and social development of children in such a way that they will be prepared to function in and adapt to a rapidly changing world.

References Cited

- African Development Bank 1986, Education Sector Policy Paper. Abidjan: African Development Bank.
- Akwesi, Christian K. 1985, "Patterns of childrearing practices and their effect on personality formation", in P.A. Twumasi (ed.), *Problems and Aspirations of Ghanaian Children: Implications for Policy and Action*. Accra: University of Legon.
- Burdin, Judith. "Traditional and changing patterns of childrearing," n.d.
- Dasen, P.R., B. Inhelder, M. Lavalee and J. Retschitzki 1978, *Naissance de l'intelligence chez l'enfant Baoule de Cote d'Ivoire*. Berne: Hans Huber.
- de Vries, M.W., and Super, C.M, "Contextual influences on the Brazelton Neonatal Behavioral Assessment Scale and implications for its cross-cultural use." In A. Sameroff (ed.), *Organization and stability of newborn behavior*. Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development. 43 (5-6), 92-101.
- Doob, L.W. 1965, Psychology. In R.A. Lystad (ed.), *The African World: A Survey of Social Research*. New York: Praeger.
- Emy, P. 1972, *L'enfant et son milieu en Afrique Noire, Essais sur l'education traditionnelle*. Paris: Payot.
- Gay, J. and M. Cole 1967, *The new mathematics in an old culture*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.
- Harkness, S, 1975, *Child language socialization in a Kipsigis community of Kenya*. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Harvard University.
- Harkness, S. and C. Super 1977, "Why African children are so hard to test," *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 285, 326-331.
- Levine, R.A. 1963, "Childrearing in sub-Saharan Africa: an interim report," *Bulletin of the Menninger Clinic*, 27, 245-256.
- Levine, R.A. 1966, *Dreams and deeds: achievement motivation in Nigeria*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Levine, R.A., N.H. Klein and C.R. Owen 1967, "Father-child relationships and changing life-styles in Ibadan, Nigeria" In H. Miner (ed.) *The city in modern Africa*. New York: Praeger.
- Levine, R.A. 1974, " Parental goals: A cross-cultural view," *Teachers College Record*, 76, 226-239.
- Lloyd, B.B, 1970, "Yoruba mothers' reports on childrearing: Some theoretical and methodological considerations," In P. Mayer (ed.) *Socialization: The approach from social anthropology*. London: Tavistock.
- Manley, D. 1967, *Growing up*. Lagos: African Universities Press.
- Makoju, G.A.E. 1986, "Traditional Igbo concept of children: a psychological perspective," In E.B. Wilson (ed.) *Psychology and Society, Selected Readings*. Ife, Nigeria: Nigerian Psychological Association.
- Munroe. R.L. and R.H. Munroe 1972, "Obedience among children in an East African society," *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 395-399.
- Oppong, Christine 1973, *Growing up in Dagbon*. Accra: Ghana Publishing Corporation.

Ravenhill, P. 1976, " Wan female initiation," Africa.

Sannoh, B.O. 1986, "Traditional Yoruba child psychology," In E.B. Wilson (ed.) *Psychology and Society: Selected Readings*. Ife, Nigeria: Nigerian Psychological Association.

Shelton, A.J. 1968, "Igbo childrearing, eldership, and dependence: Further notes for gerontologists and others," *The Gerontologist*, 8 (4), 236-241.

Super, C. and S. Harkness 1987, "The Developmental Niche: A conceptualization at the interface of child and culture," *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, 9, 1-25.

Whiting, B.B. and J.W.M. Whiting 1975, *Children of six cultures: A psycho-cultural analysis*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

Copyright © 1988 UNICEF

Early Childhood Counts: Programming Resources for Early Childhood Care and Development.
CD-ROM. The Consultative Group on ECCD. Washington D.C. : World Bank, 1999.