

with a mask personifying a bush spirit, who runs after children and women to whip them, which stresses the new adult status of the circumcised boys. During the circumcision (as well as when washing the knives), a rhombus is spun to produce the sound that is said to be the growl of a leopard. The circumcised boys are said to have 'hit' or 'tied' the leopard (they will later symbolically 'kill the leopard' and then eat it). After this, the boys stay for three days with the circumciser. During the night, some of them tour the village with adult men to mask their voice and sing licentious songs. They then stay in a hut in the bush until their wounds have healed. When they come back into the village, they are paired with girls, and each pair develops a joking relationship. Men and women then keep in separate spaces, and the women produce their own mask, caricaturing the mask of the men. The women bring the young girls to the river, where they undergo a simulacrum of circumcision during which their labia are pinched with crab claws. The ethnographic description is accompanied by an interesting discussion of the interplay between traditional rituals on one side, and Islam or Christianity on the other, arguing that today circumcision plays a crucial role in building the identity of the Dii.

This short summary does not do justice to the unusual and remarkable wealth of ethnographic and linguistic detail provided by the author, who writes in a French academic tradition that gives unstinting importance to the utmost detail and produces very thick descriptions. Although it might appear unnecessarily detailed for readers unfamiliar with Adamawa, the ethnographic description of the most important ritual of the Dii will provide anthropologists working in the region with an important basis for comparative studies.

QUENTIN GAUSSET
Institute of Anthropology
University of Copenhagen

ALMA GOTTLIEB, *The Afterlife Is Where We Come From: the culture of infancy in West Africa*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press (pb \$25.00 – 0 226 30502 3; hb \$62.50 – 0 226 30501 5). 2004, 424 pp.

Occasionally, one reads a book that is worth raving about to academic and non-academic friends alike. This beautifully written ethnography about Beng babies in Côte d'Ivoire is one such book.

While I have been involved in the childhood studies programme in my university, this book pushed the boundaries of what I thought possible by focusing on the culture of infancy. As Gottlieb argues, babies are 'deeply constructed by culture' (p. xvi). She explains why anthropologists have not paid attention to the experiences of babies: they are seen to lack experience and memory, to be more biological than cultural, to be more passive than active, and as incapable of speaking. As a result, babies are seen as pre-cultural and unworthy of anthropologists' attention. Gottlieb contrasts each of these assumptions (many of which I held) with the Beng model of babies, in which they lead spiritual lives because they have recently emerged from the afterlife. As such, they have a memory of their life there, a desire for items that remind them of it, and an understanding of all languages. Thus, she shows how Euro-American assumptions about infancy are deeply cultural.

In debunking the Euro-American folk model of infancy which is sometimes legitimized by the academic literature, she elevates the Beng folk model of infancy, in which infants are accorded a high level of agency, to a theoretical level. Thus, following the Beng folk model, she asks us to consider how 'infants

actively shape the lives of those around them, contributing to the constitution of their social worlds' (p. 60). Gottlieb's rotating of the folk model to privilege the Beng was valuable in making me ask: might a social theory be developed to account for different kinds of folk theories of infancy, including Euro-American and Beng?

The study of infants requires different kinds of methodologies. This study is based primarily on three months of fieldwork in 1993, although Gottlieb draws from her engagement with the Beng since 1979. She followed two babies intensely, at different ages, from morning to evening. She interviewed mothers, caretakers of infants, and diviners, who interpreted babies' speech and desires. With her research assistants, she recorded what babies were doing minute by minute in a given period (generally a little more than two hours long), allowing her to take note of motor development, sleeping and feeding patterns, and how they were passed along quite frequently through a variety of caretakers.

The book is filled with wonderful photographs of babies protected against spiritual harm by the careful bathing and elaborate decorations – painting and jewellery – on their bodies. To friends with children, I shared tidbits from the book: about babies being toilet-trained, through enemas a few months after birth, in order to decrease the risk of spiritual harm and to persuade babysitters, mainly young girls, to care for the babies; and about how 72 per cent of Beng babies' naps lasted thirty minutes or less, with vertical naps on someone's back lasting longer than those in which the baby was lying horizontally and out of somatic contact with another person.

Gottlieb has taken seriously Paul Farmer's criticism of anthropology that it does not pay attention to structural violence, even when it affects the communities among which we work. She makes a strong case for how structural violence has affected the lives of Beng young people, particularly in terms of infant mortality and sickness. She criticizes sharply the lack of affordable vaccines, medical personnel's paternalism towards their patients; the lack of accessible clinics and dispensaries; and the under-recording of infant deaths, which she traces back to structural adjustment's effect on the Ivorian government and economy. Furthermore, as young women migrate more and have more access to their own farm plots at younger ages, there is an increasing dearth of babysitters, making it more difficult for mothers of young children to tend to their own plots and thus provide their families with nutritious food. These conditions are no doubt exacerbated by the continuing tension in the country.

This is a rich and absorbing book, and I recommend it highly to anthropologists for showing us why the culture of infancy is an important area of study; to Africanists for its linking of ritual, the wider political arena, and children; and to all parents for revealing alternative caregiving practices and conceptions of child development. I, for one, have not been able to look at babies in the same way since. I applaud Gottlieb's accomplishment.

CATI COE
Rutgers University

KAREN TRANBERG HANSEN and MARIKEN VAA (eds), *Reconsidering Informality: perspectives from urban Africa*. Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet (pb SEK250, £16.95, €25 – 91 7106 518 0). 2002, 240 pp.

This volume brings together two distinct bodies of social science scholarship that hitherto have been separated in most work on urban Africa: urban land