



# Informal learning of adult roles in Baale

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Baale children must learn both social and practical skills. These are seldom "taught" in a formal sense, but rather learned through both play and work. Much play is built around both social and practical skills. Play merges increasingly with work as children grow older. Growing skills permit a child to work in a very independent way much of the time, and adults organise children's labour so as to encourage this. This seems to give children pride in both work and in autonomy. Baale folk hold that "laziness is death", but this is not an austere work ethic; challenge, companionship and carefully supported competence make work a major source of satisfaction. Children also learn to manage and direct their anger through play. Controlled anger is an important element in adult autonomy. Cooperation and autonomy are central to Baale adulthood. They are equally valued; equally necessary to both the individual and the community<sup>1</sup>.

## Informal learning

The study of informal learning is important because it can provide a window onto learning processes that are elusive. Recent accounts of learning stress the fact that human infants are "preadapted for social engagement"<sup>2</sup>; are uniquely adapted to relate to those who respond contingently to their actions<sup>3</sup>; and are actively involved in the construction of their knowledge<sup>4</sup>. If we accept this view then learning occurs constantly. Further, it is embedded in everyday activities and interactions. By definition, the study of such learning processes must be done in the contexts of everyday life. Here the anthropologist has the advantage over psychologists and educationalists by whom learning contexts tend to be treated as discrete objects of study. Linguists and psychologists recognise that early learning - of language, motor control and sociality - occurs in the course of the maturation of the infant within the family. But in western society the school-oriented perspective leads to the assumption that such informal learning is unimportant for children and adolescents. We tend to equate learning with literacy, and assign this to school experience.

1. This paper was written to accompany a video film drawn from extensive filming of children's activities in Baale, northern Ghana. This work is part of an ongoing research project on patterns of informal learning in four northern Ghana societies. Video film is being used as a basis for fine-grained analysis of activities and interaction; it is also central to the systematic comparison of material across these four societies. The argument presented in this paper draws on the analysis of this visual material, as well as on other anthropological data. The poor quality of the photographs with this paper is due to their being taken from single frames of video film. However the argument depends so much on visual representation that it was decided to include them, despite the poor quality.

2. L. Murray, and C. Travarthan, 1985: 212 "Emotional regulation of interactions between two-month-olds and their mothers", in *Social perception in infants*, (eds) T. Field and N. Fox, Ablex, Norwood, NJ.

3. J. Watson, 1979, "Perception of contingency as a determinant of social responsiveness" in *The origins of human responsiveness* (ed.) E. Thoman, Erlbaum, Hillside, NJ.

4. F. Gearing and L. Sangree, (eds.) 1979, *Toward a cultural theory of education and schooling*, Mouton, The Hague.

There are two ways in which this is problematic. First, it ignores the learning which occurs outside of school: learning of attitudes, norms and social roles. And secondly, in ignoring informal learning, we do not take as problematic the social dimensions, affective and interactional, of the pedagogical process. It is only through understanding these that we may hope to address the question of why certain categories of children fail to learn literacy in school. A better understanding of informal learning might permit more effective schooling.

### Parameters of informal learning

Current theoretical work sees all learners as 'active agents selecting options within a probabilistically constructed, socioculturally, ecologically patterned process'<sup>5</sup>. Where the learner is an active agent, it is clear that *attention* is a critical factor in learning. On one level this is obvious to any parent or teacher. The child who ignores what is being taught is insulated against learning it. But attention operates in more subtle ways. Here I want to consider two factors: motivation and focus. Motivation, for the present purpose, can be taken as a positive intention to do, or avoid doing something. But this is itself complex. Why does a child "want" to learn? A simple answer is that the child wants to learn things which seem related to goals which are personally important, and which are seen as attainable. This is where 'focus' becomes relevant. Goals and their attainability are both culturally and socially constructed. Admired and powerful adults and older children focus the child's attention on certain skills and roles as desirable. This need not be explicit; probably it is usually implicit due to the child's wish to resemble admired figures. Within a particular socio-cultural setting activities "naturally" occur which are defined as appropriate, i.e. attainable, for this child. Here the activities themselves act to focus the child's attention on some aspect of a skill or role which is within its capabilities. Often this focussing occurs through the child's participation. A mother finds a small pot so that her four-year old daughter can accompany her to the well for water. Learning to balance this pot is a matter of pride for the little girl, and as she grows stronger and taller she is given larger pots to carry. It is a matter of astonishment to the inept European that a teen-age girl can carry the huge and heavy pots on which the household depends for its water supply. But the necessary skills have been acquired so gradually that for the Baale girl this is "perfectly natural". In this example, the motivation to learn to carry a water pot was supplied by the child's wish to be able to do things "like her mother", "like a real woman". The skill she needs is developed over time through the careful grading of the

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5. M.A. Pitman, R.A. Eiskovits, and M.L. Dobbert, 1989, *Culture acquisition: a holistic approach to human learning*, Praeger, New York.

difficulty of the task to her strength and coordination. The same pattern is seen in the thoughtful selection of a basket that is small enough so that, when filled with maize cobs, it will not be too heavy for an eight-year old to carry. Here the role of the "expert" - the mother, other women and older girls - is clearly critical. I have seen a woman quickly intervene when a girl was about to try to carry too large a basket. Perhaps she was concerned that the girl not injure herself; perhaps she was more concerned to prevent the spilling of the load, and the time and effort involved in gathering up the maize cobs. But the consequence of such interventions is that a child learns through successfully participating in an activity judged valuable by the community.

These instances are clear examples of what psychologists term "scaffolding": the organisation of an activity so that the novice/child participates jointly with an expert/adult and gradually develops the understanding and skills necessary to carry out the task independently. The child participates in the total process, but her competence may at first be very limited. As her skill grows, she takes over more and more responsibility. In these examples, the task as a whole is managed by older women, and suitable sub-tasks are assigned to children of different ages according to their strength and skill. Observations of daily life in Baale provide innumerable examples. For instance, Bmankwon, a skilled potter, takes time from fashioning a water jar to finish off her 8 year old daughter's crude pot. She assigns to 14 year old Bufer the task of preparing the clay by trampling, and includes Bufer's simple bowls among those for firing and sale. This is also an example of the decomposition of the overall task into smaller units which can be mastered separately by those of different capacities. This bringing of the division of labour into the learning process has been described for Daboya weavers<sup>6</sup> and Liberian tailors (Lave 1977)<sup>7</sup>. In all these cases attention, motivation and focussing are social processes and not simply attributes of an individual child.

The scaffolding by adults of a child's learning of skills is very obvious, and clearly fundamental to role learning. But scaffolding occurs in two other related ways that are just as important. Children's participation in the basic activities of their world - in ritual, in family and community disputes, and of course in production - which could be called ecological or situational scaffolding is one; the other is play. These types of scaffolding are not intentional or planned. They are particularly important in providing a window on children's own active construction of their knowledge. Indeed it is play which permits us to see how situational scaffolding is understood and built upon by children in making sense of their world. In play certain roles, certain skills, are focussed on, elaborated, practiced.

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6. E. Goody, 1982, "Daboya weavers : relations of production, dependence and reciprocity", in *From Craft to Industry*, ed. E. Goody, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

7. J. Lave, 1977, "Cognitive consequences of traditional apprenticeship training in West Africa", *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 8 (3), 177, 80.

## Play and work in the informal learning of adult roles

### *Observation and imitation*



1. Two four-year old girls : will they one day have breasts too ?



2. Sei is intent on managing the large hoe so he can dig earth with his father.



3. These three sisters are "working" together to grind flour as their mother does on the large grinding slab inside the Yir.

Probably there is no time when a Baale child's awareness of itself is separated from sexual identity. Two girls of four exploring their own and each other's breasts have just wandered away from a group of older girls who are playing clapping and tossing games, and singing about boy friends. They are oblivious, however, of the older girls, or of the women standing around. It is their own potential sexuality they are intrigued by (photo 1).

Four-year old Sei follows his father everywhere, often to his annoyance. One morning when his father was hoeing earth for building I noticed that Sei had found himself a hoe and was also silently scraping up earth. Although his father apparently ignores Sei, he works around him, and doesn't disturb his intense concentration. Sei's earth is included, without comment, in the final pile. Even at this early age, being allowed to use a hoe, and being able to use it, are emblems of being "like father", and thus of masculinity. What is very clear from this film is that Sei is concentrating intently on managing the hoe, planning the direction of his work in relation to his father's path - and not particularly interested in his father's approval or attention. It is the task itself which fascinates him; though obviously the task is inseparable from his father's role (photo 2).

Both these scenes illustrate the force of sex roles for focussing attention, and suggest their potential power for motivation. Sei's hoeing already shows a surprising level of skill.

Girls' play also focusses attention on role skills. Until the coming of grinding machines, women spent hours on most days grinding grain into flour, for porridge or for brewing beer. There is a grinding machine in Baale, but women often don't have the money to use it, and every *Yir* still has one or more grinding stones in use. This is a skill which little girls all seem to be fascinated by, and which they all play at endlessly. The three daughters of Kulpora, aged 2, 4 and 7, all shared the same pretend grinding slab, but each "worked" with her own grinding stone to turn sand into "flour", at her own level of skill (photo 3).

The video shows that while the two-year old only manages to hold and push the stone intermittently, the four-year old has understood the grinding process, and the need to carefully collect the flour as it is pushed out in front of the grinding stone. The seven-year old however has mastered the flicking of the grain from the sides of the grinding slab back under the stone, and uses song to give rhythm to her movements. Clearly even such young children are paying very close attention to the grinding process. However, caught in this film is the way in which their play together

serves not only to perfect their skills, but also to make more visible to them the components of those skills.

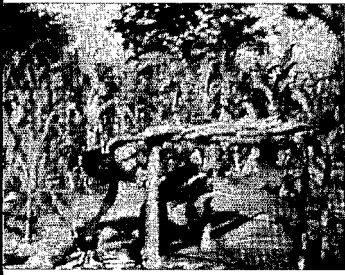
Both play and work link participation in basic productive activities to motivation to become competent in adult roles. Indeed so closely interwoven are these threads that it is difficult to know where best to enter the pattern. Very young children seek to emulate adults of their own sex in ways that are exploratory of their own capacities [two girls exploring each others' breasts]. Or they may try to carry out tasks along side adults even when they are ignored [Sammy's younger son hoeing earth for building; little girl 'sorting leaves' for soup with grandmother]. At first, as with four-year old Sei, their work is not sought by adults, but it is clearly being offered. At the same age these children hang around older children who are playing at adult skills. They are partially included in these activities, often because the older children are also acting as their caretakers: sometimes because they are given roles to play in the game, as with the younger two sisters grinding flour [3 sisters playing at grinding flour].

Games of the older children are themselves often merged with productive work. This is particularly evident during the period when crops are ripening and must be guarded against hungry animals and birds. This is a community which knows hunger in the weeks before the ripening of the first maize and the maturing of new yams. In July 1989, these same children were often lethargic from hunger, and there was neither porridge or yams to go with the soup. The ripening of new crops means more than one meal a day, and every meal, however small is eagerly devoured. Both children and adults speak of this period of the farming year with great affection.

However it is also the time when birds and animals threaten the maturing crops. Children are vital participants in the constant battle with these predators. They are sent to the fields at dawn, to remain until the sun is high, and to return in mid-afternoon till dusk. For the farmer, the problem is how to keep the children alert and actively patrolling the extensive fields. It is recognised that a single child will soon slip away to join friends in a neighbouring field. So two or three are sent together whenever possible. And most important, they are given food to cook there in the field. At the beginning of this period there are no new crops to be eaten in this way. Instead dried beans and maize kernels are boiled on tiny fires. Even these are delighted in. But when the first maize cobs are mature enough to roast, and when new yams are ready, there is real excitement about the day's expedition. Now the fields become the main playground for

4. *This boy and his 'sister' (father's brother's daughter) are patrolling the maize field, scaring away birds and monkeys.*





5. *Kobina cooks a piece of yam on the children's improvised kitchen fire, hidden in the high maize.*



6. *A girl and younger neighbour boy play-wrestling after a snack of maize roasted while guarding crops.*



7. *These tiny kitchens behind Bisen Yir are used each evening by three girls (8, 9 and 10 years old) who may take two hours to cook minute portions of porridge and soup which they share with their 'husbands'.*



8. *The girls of Choweli Yir are pretending that their friends from neighbouring Gbolo Yir are visitors from another village. Together the friends prepare a meal to welcome the 'visitors'.*

the children, and they are likely to be found there even in mid-day, roasting maize, boiling yam, and playing games or practicing dances. Older children organise the cooking and the games, but individuals come and go between neighbouring farms. Again the social exchange is as important as the food (photos 4, 5, 6).

For the boys, this time also provides a valued link with older youths and men who have heavier tasks. They tend to spend their time on these fields, running errands, and later sharing the mid-afternoon meal prepared for them in the farm by teen-age sisters.

Here they will plant a few yams of their own - eagerly inspected almost daily to see if they are yet mature. And near-by they may clear several tiny patches for their own maize and some ground nuts. Again these crops are real ones; and of course they belong entirely to their youthful farmers.

Only a few cows are now kept in the village, in contrast to the large herds of twenty years ago. At that time boys were sent to herd the cattle, and had informal gangs with their own leaders based on contests of wrestling skill. These leaders would organise raids on the ripening crops in village farms. It is said that if a farmer caught the raider he dared not refuse him the yams or maize for fear of retaliation by the gang of "cow boys". Such raids were thus apparently semi-legitimate. The farmers depended on the cow boys to care for their cattle, and the boys considered that this entitled them to take food when they wished. By taking the food without asking, the farmer the cow boys were asserting their autonomy as independent productive members of the community, and no doubt also implicitly asserting their power in a society where men refuse to take orders from other men.

But the skills involved in production are themselves the subject of elaborate play routines. The three little girls grinding 'flour' are doing what every Baale girl does. No less common is the sight of small girls cooking on tiny fires built against a compound wall, or sheltered by tree trunks in the field (photos 7, 8).

The girls who spend so much time "cooking" in this way are cooking real food, and sharing and eating it is a very important part of the game. By the time they are 11 or 12 they are quite skilled in making soups and the rather complex process of making porridge. Now they are often asked to make part of a family meal, as well as joining in other domestic tasks. They say they no longer play at cooking behind the *Yir* because they have real work to do. The low mud partitions and fireplaces that demarcate the kitchens behind Bisen *Yir* were made by girls 'too old' to play at cooking, each for her own younger sister.

By the time a girl is 13 or 14, she is likely to be sent to cook for the men and boys working on the farm. Bufer (13)

often cooks on the farm of one of her older half-brothers, Sammy or Dumah (photo 9).

There are several levels of skill required of Bufer: she has to be able to prepare soup ingredients, grind them, and make soup; she has to cook the yams or porridge; and she has to synchronise both operations. (Any cook knows that the timing is often the most difficult part of preparing a meal.) And now she is cooking for several hungry men and boys, no longer play amounts in tiny pots and portions. Bufer also does much of the cooking at home. Women expect to turn over routine cooking to their daughters by the time they are 12 or 13. This frees them for other tasks, and ensures that their daughters are accomplished cooks by the time they marry (photos 10a, 10b).

When did Bufer 'learn' to cook? When is cooking 'play' and when does it become 'work'? When is cooking 'pretence' and when is it 'real'?

Of course these questions would not be asked by Baale folk themselves. Indeed at each age I would argue that their cooking is in every sense real for them. At first they are intent on being able to make a fire and then to control it by finding suitable sticks so that the fire is hot enough to really boil water. Then they beg real leaves or okra from their mothers and make soup. They consult and advise each other about the progress of their soups, and the seriousness of the task is evident from the pictures. And here lies the significance of the fact that one always finds two or three girls cooking together. Of course it is more fun that way, but their lending and borrowing of utensils and firewood shows that this is real interdependence. A girl does not have to be able to carry out the whole process on her own at this stage; she has the support and advice of her fellow cooks. And if the soup is watery and the okra half-raw, it is still real soup. But the next time she will try cooking it longer, or cutting the vegetables in smaller pieces. When they have confidence in their skills they begin to share their meals with boys of their own play group - teasing each other that these are their husbands. And their frank comments about too much pepper or not enough salt challenge the girls to perfect their skills even further. At the same time, of course,



9. Bufer mashes the seasoning for the soup she is cooking to accompany pounded yams for the meal that ends a long day's farming for men and boys.

10a and 10b. Men and boys quickly finish a large pot of soup and many servings of yam which Bufer has cooked entirely alone in the farm. Men, boys and Bufer eat separately.





the girls are given similar tasks by their mothers at home - tending the cooking fire, preparing vegetables, grinding peppers, leaves and tomatoes. So there is never a sharp break between the chores at home and the skills that are practiced in play cooking. And both at home and at play both preparation, and sharing and eating the food are profoundly social activities. Mothers, older sisters and peers lend ingredients, utensils - and advice; and the enjoyment of the resulting meal is evident, as is the keen interest of their boy friends who hang around hopefully as the preparations proceed.

In Baale one of the most important things that both boys and girls must learn is how to manage relations with peers. Among the cow herders, wrestling acted to establish a recognised hierarchy. A boy who was beaten had to accept this. Any complaint at home would be ignored by the adults, but it would mean another fight, and if he were really weaker, another defeat. The one rule, then as now, was that no weapons should be used. This is not trivial. Today there seems to be a pattern in children's fighting: a dispute quickly becomes a wrestling match; this may end in a stand-off, or in one party putting the other down. They may then separate and joke, or turn to other things. But often they become really angry, and one picks up any potential weapon - Jujeer fighting with Kojo on the farm siezed a cutlass (photo 11).

This is the signal for adults to intervene by taking away the weapon - though this may be difficult. By now the level of anger is high, and if he cannot get at his weapon the aggressor usually runs off - into the fields or his house. I have seen this with both boys and girls of 8-12 years. After a period of withdrawal, the child usually returns, though the whole sequence can easily start again. What is interesting is that children do not seem to fight alone, away from others who can, and do, intervene. And those who were opponents one day can be chasing parrots or cooking together the next. Indeed Kojo, the instigator of the violent fight with Jujeer in the farm, rushed to his defence a few later in a confrontation between the children of Choweli Yir and those of neighbouring Kwabina Yir. It seems that Baale children need to learn to use aggression as well as to control it. And it is striking that when wrestling turns to fighting, adults do not intervene unless someone siezes a weapon. In discussing the fights I happened to observe, it seems that the siezure of weapons is not related to either long-standing grudges or to malicious personalities. Rather, it is the child who feels he is in the right, and yet -being smaller- is loosing a fight, who grabs a stick or cutlass in order to assert his or her rights. It is this escalation that adults refuse to permit, and not the settlement of quarrels through physical fighting. The child has to learn that you must assert your rights, if necessary by fighting for them. But if fighting proves you to be the



*11. The disagreement between Jujeer and Kojo over sharing groundnuts began with a dispute. This led to wrestling, and then each boy siezed a weapon. When one of the men took away the weapons, they faught angrily with fists. (By supper time they were friends again).*

weaker one, either you have to leave the group or accept the superior position of your fellow.

Both boys and girls wrestle and fight, though this is far more frequent for boys. For them it is the basis of adolescent peer relations, now including such activities as gambling with cowries for maize to sell, expeditions to neighbouring villages as farm laborers, and dancing at funerals. And ultimately of the relations between men which recognise the autonomy of each individual to offer his labour and support to other men in exchange for reciprocal services. Relations between girls are less oriented towards preserving autonomy, but this is still important for them, as it is for women. Among themselves women are outspoken in defence of their interests, and careful to avoid trespassing on the rights of others. This is paralleled by women's need for reciprocal services in the lengthy processing of food stuffs such as leeri seeds, and in planting and harvesting. Successful adults of both sexes must be able to balance independence and interdependence.

The material on informal learning in Baale strongly supports the view that children are active agents in constructing their learning. The process of scaffolding involves the child doing a task together with "experts" who carry it through while the child gains skills necessary to take responsibility for it herself. Much of this scaffolding in Baale occurs when the child participates in real activities - from funerals, to domestic chores, to agricultural production. But role play is another very important context for scaffolding. Here children practice what they already know, have freedom for trial and error, and are supported by older or more practiced peers. Indeed, the distinction between "work" and "play" is not easy to maintain. The children cooking for their "husbands" or for "visitors" are cooking real food, and they really eat it. Other children don't hang around in hopes of a share of pretend food. And equally real are the skills which the children learn - how to hoe and weed, how to cook porridge without lumps and make the soup sweet, and how to keep the baby happy while you are busy making supper. But they are also learning less tangible skills - of sharing, reciprocity, and the management of anger. What is particularly striking is the high level of motivation to become skillful at adult roles which is evident in both work and play.

Perhaps most fundamental of all they are learning how to "do", to "be", Birifor males and females in a way that grows out of working and playing with their peers, kin and neighbours. Just as it is impossible to be a man or woman alone, separate from others, so learning to be men and women depends on playing and working with others.