GENERATIONS
A UNIVERSAL FAMILY ALBUM

EDITED BY ANNA R. COHN AND LUCINDA A. LEACH
INTRODUCTIONS BY SHEILA KITZINGER
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KOREAN BABY SHOES
OFTEN WERE TOO LARGE FOR SMALL FEET IN ORDER TO SYMBOLIZE GROWTH AND LONG LIFE
(cat. 181).
During the last 18 years I have been visiting the Iteso and conducting field research among them. The Iteso are a Nilotic-speaking people who live on the border between Kenya and Uganda. In spite of the extraordinary changes that have visited their society during the time I have known them, they have chosen to keep certain aspects of their lives constant. Today, as in times past, the religious rituals and medical practices of the Iteso display an almost obsessive concern with the health and well-being of their children.

The birth, growth, and maturation of children are essential to the continuity of any culture. It should be no surprise, then, that the customs and practices connected with producing and raising children—and training them in their society's ways—are of paramount importance to all peoples. What does surprise perhaps is that even though cultures attribute great meaning to the customs and practices necessary to their survival—parenting, birth, and the initiation of children—the specific meaning of these activities can vary greatly from culture to culture.

The rationales for these customs and practices are the beliefs that peoples hold in common. These beliefs are not just abstractions—theories isolated from experience. They express what people value most about their lives and, at the same time, contain rules and recipes for managing the dangers of the world in which they live.

The Iteso live in a hostile environment. As in most parts of Africa, the rate of infant mortality during the pre-colonial period was 50 percent. Kenya is a rich country by African standards, yet during the drought of the early 1980s perhaps half of the people of Kenya's northern deserts died of starvation.

So, becoming a parent—having children—is no automatic or easy procedure among the Iteso. Yet their very definition of an adult is tied to parenthood. No one can be called a man (ekiliokit) or a woman (aberu) until he or she is married. Even this status is only a way station to parenthood. Only then can people assume the full rights and duties of adults.

Anthropologists have often shown how reproducing the culture is the latent agenda of any society's beliefs and institutions. Less often they point out how much this is an overt goal, defined and expressed by a people in their rituals. Iteso women, in all their important rituals, dramatically reenact their forms of domestic labor—tasks associated with producing food and feeding children. Infants born to a family after an earlier child has died must undergo a special ritual in which they are named for one of the intrusive animals of the "bush"—such as a hyena or a jackal—that invade the home and destroy what the people have produced.

If rituals associated with birth following death express the dangers that daily threaten the Iteso, the birth of twins is the occasion for rituals celebrating the felicity of procreative powers. Called Mamai and Eja—maternal uncle and paternal aunt—twins stand for all the blessings of the successful and orderly production of the world. Twins are a gift, the Iteso say, and twins are required to be the first to taste the
fruits of the harvest and to drink this ritual's newly brewed alcohol. The ceremonies surrounding the birth of twins are the most elaborate in the Iteso repertoire, and it may take years for a family to store enough wealth to sponsor such a celebration. Twins are named to commemorate the Iteso sense that surviving is a cooperative effort, with high value placed on kin and community.

Still, the scent of death taints even the celebration of twins, the high point of Iteso culture. "If twins are not separated," a wise old woman said, "sickness swells in your home, at the very least until one of you leaves." What she is telling us here is that if a twin doesn't die, someone else will. There is a sense expressed in this that bodies cannot occupy the same conceptual and social space.

The Iteso view of birth is essentially tragic. Their customs and beliefs assert that even the most successful births allow only temporary relief from the material world against which they struggle. For the Iteso, birth is also one of the moments at which death is most likely to intervene. In any case, averting death at birth is at one and the same time temporary and the highest good they can imagine. They acknowledge the inevitable at the same time as they struggle against it.

My American students used to ask me what purpose there was in studying exotic societies such as the Iteso. American ideas dispose us to believe that we can escape our fate through technological means. We may have something to learn from the tragic view of Iteso culture, which acknowledges that life and death are inexorably intertwined.

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