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Becoming a Blacksmith in Gbarngasuakwelle

David F. Lancy*

In analyzing the processes involved in becoming a blacksmith in a Kpelle town in West Africa, the paper highlights the failure of simple typologies to account for the contrast between formal schooling and out-of-school or informal learning. The blacksmith is shown to carry three subroles: skilled worker, big-man, and medicine man. Each involves different skills and each requires different training processes. These processes are described and attention is paid to their formal and informal characteristics. INFORMAL EDUCATION, APPRENTICESHIP, PLAY, WEST AFRICA, KPELLE.

Recently, Studstill (1979) has taken to task those who would create simple dichotomies between formal education in schools and informal processes of enculturation that take place in the society at large. He and others (e.g., Nadel, 1942; Lancy, 1975a) have described a process of instruction during initiation into African secret societies that bears more than a little resemblance to that which takes place in Western-inspired schools. As this paper will show, formal and informal processes are not isomorphic with institutionalized/non-institutionalized opportunities for learning. This paper also contributes to the as yet small (Lave, 1977; Smith, 1978; Childs and Greenfield, in press) body of ethnographic descriptions of skill acquisition in non-Western societies.

The outline of how an individual might become a blacksmith is drawn from a comprehensive study of the patterns of learning work and play in a West African town (Lancy, 1974, 1975b). The town in question is Gbarngasuakwelle. With a population of around 800, it lies in the tropical rain forest belt of West Africa about 175 miles northeast of the Liberian capital of Monrovia. The majority of the inhabitants are from the Kpelle tribe, one of the largest tribes in West Africa, numbering around 200,000 in Liberia and the neighboring country of Guinea.

Procedure

The Gbarngasuakwelle field research was designed in one sense as an antidote to earlier experimental research on Kpelle child development (Cole et al., 1971). Rather than study the process whereby Kpelle children acquire some abstract set of cognitive skills, this basically ethnographic research was designed to study how Kpelle children acquire the skills possessed by Kpelle adults, skills relevant to and valued by Kpelle society. Participant observation

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was complemented by lengthy interviews with approximately 20 percent of the town's inhabitants, covering the following topics: (1) definitions of terms in and the structure of the domain of work or *tii* and play or *pele*, (2) descriptions of the individual's work habits and skills, (3) life history accounts focusing on how the individual had acquired the appropriate behaviors, and (4) discussion of what contribution, if any, play had made to this process. These interviews were followed up with detailed observation of work and play activities. Attention was paid, wherever possible, to capturing the process whereby work and play skills are acquired, and, in some cases, this was done via controlled experiments.

The study of blacksmithing reported here involved a number of compromises. On the one hand, the blacksmith represents the epitome of the Kpelle "education system"—a worthwhile object of study. Yet the facts that only two blacksmiths were available as informants and that the process of becoming a blacksmith necessarily spans at least two decades mean that the description that follows must be taken as highly speculative. Fortunately, there are many parallels between the education of a blacksmith and the education of other skilled workers (e.g., potters and weavers). These additional data will be used where appropriate.

The Blacksmith

The Kpelle practice upland rice farming using slash-and-burn shifting cultivation. Rice is both staple crop and focal point for many social, economic, and political transactions.

The blacksmith is a key figure in all Kpelle towns, at least partly because of his crucial role in rice cultivation. He makes a number of wooden-handled iron tools, but the two most important are a machetelike knife and a short-handled hoe. The machete is an all-purpose tool used by men in chopping down trees and cutting underbrush preparatory to burning the field before it is planted. The hoe is associated with women. They use it to loosen the soil prior to broadcasting the rice seed and later in weeding around the rice stalks (Lancy, 1979).

The blacksmith was most easily and readily identified as a "skilled worker." However, informants mentioned a variety of other attributes the blacksmith must possess that were not mentioned or were less often mentioned in descriptions of other skilled workers. Additional questioning and participant observation revealed that these attributes were associated more generally with "big men" and with "medicine men." Considerable confidence, then, can be placed in a characterization of the blacksmith's role as being composed of three subroles: the skilled worker, the big-man, and the medicine man.

First, we take up skilled worker. The blacksmith is one of five types of skilled worker, which include leatherworker, potter, wood-carver, and weaver. All these skills are specialized in the sense that only a fraction of the adult male population can practice any of them. All involve using tools to "construct" an end product. Other tasks are labeled as skilled, such as mat weaving, trap making, and sewing, but those who practice them are not denoted as skilled workers.

The blacksmith's workshop is an open-walled building with a sharply pitched, thatched roof. Inside one finds a forge, which consists of two hardened-earth mounds separated by a narrow trough in which a fire of wood chips is laid. An assistant works two leather bags, which force air through bamboo tubes that penetrate one mound and exit at the base of the fire. Large and smaller rocks serve as anvils, and the blacksmith uses a variety of hammers, punches, and tongs in his work. Shaping a tool requires the careful application of heat and pressure. The potential tool is alternately heated in the fire and hammered until it is of uniform thickness and of roughly the right shape. Then shaping tools and tongs are used to bend it into the appropriate form. Sandstone is used to grind and sharpen the tool, and, finally, it is polished with scaly leaves and fine sand.

The inhabitants of the town are distrusting of strangers. For any individual, the category of stranger will not only include people from outside the town, but other residents who live in another quarter of the town or who have no kin ties to the individual. The principal reason for this introversion is fear of witchcraft and sorcery; hence residents limit their contacts as much as possible to a small, well-defined group of intimates. There are, however, several people in the town who, by virtue of their jobs, must interact with strangers, and these include the blacksmith and other skilled workers, the town chief, diviners, and medicine men. These men must serve the needs of all the town's residents. This has two consequences that lead them into the category of big-men. First, they are wealthier on the average because the proceeds of their farms are augmented by payments in cash and kind for their services. Second, serving their clients means not only providing the requisite services, but also charging a fair price and, most importantly, respecting the private lives of their clients. The blacksmith's relationship to his client is multiplex. He does only bespoke work; that is, a man brings the wood and iron to him to make a specified tool. Having made and delivered the tool, the smith exacts a day's labor on his farm from the tool owner. Thus there is no middleman to buy and sell the blacksmith's tools who might shield him from his clients. The forge, also, serves as a public gathering place, a place to exchange gossip. The blacksmith, therefore, is privy to a great deal of information about the personal lives of residents. He will often be called to sit in judgment on them as an elder in the court (Lancy, *in press a*), and, if he uses his accumulated knowledge to judge wisely and fairly, his prestige will rise and he will more often be a party to gossip. Thus the blacksmith has many opportunities to exercise desired qualities like discretion, honesty, fairness, and knowledge of tradition, and in doing so he becomes a big-man. Failure to do so not only endangers his status as a big-man, but also threatens his status as a skilled worker because he may lose all his clients.

The details of the third role, medicine man, are generally hidden in secrecy. However, by persistent, yet circumspect, observation and questioning at least the outlines can be described (Lancy, 1974). As mentioned previously, rice is considerably more than just a staple crop for the Kpelle, and the blacksmith makes the two tools that are essential to its cultivation, the machete and the hoe. To the extent that every ritual occasion has some element pertaining to rice farming, the blacksmith must be involved. In

Gbarngasuakwelle, medicine, ritual, and secrecy are densely interwoven. As an example, an older woman was found guilty of having slandered another woman, so she was sentenced to perform an oath. She had to swear that she meant no harm to the woman and that she would not do it again. The ritual that surrounds oath taking is called *menà*. The blacksmith laid several of his tools in an oval-shaped flat basket normally used to winnow rice, and then laid this on the ground in front of the woman. She placed two kola nuts in the basket as evidence of her good faith. Then the woman to whom she swore placed her comb in the basket to affirm her good faith. As the woman made her oath the blacksmith cut off the head of a chicken and sprinkled its blood over the items assembled in the basket. Then the chicken was cooked with a pot of rice, and the woman had to eat it. If she had sworn falsely or insincerely, the medicine would have caught her and she would die. Here the medicine is not a tangible substance, but rather the force of all the assembled good things—the rice basket, tools, kola nuts, and so on, all of which have a positive symbolic value to drive out or entrap the evil that is in the woman. Although the oath-taking ceremony is public, the nature of the medicine must be inferred and not talked about or else it will lose its power.

A second reason that the blacksmith must know medicine is related to his status as a big-man. In his work, he must expose himself to strangers, any of whom may have malevolent intentions. Hence he must learn to make or purchase from a high-ranking medicine man numerous charms, amulets, and fetishes to protect himself. Second, as an elder sitting in judgment over others, he exposes himself to angry parties seeking retribution, and for this he also requires the protection of the medicines. Finally, the Kpelle believe that witchcraft and sorcery both originate in envy and jealousy. The blacksmith will have more wives, more children, more property, and more prestige than the average man, and he is, therefore, subject to the machinations of others who are envious of him. It is expected that because of their efforts he will often be sick and must either doctor himself or have close ties with others who know medicine.

To become a blacksmith, therefore, requires mastering all three subroles. Achieving these roles is accomplished through a variety of processes, some formal and some informal. Relatively formal activities support the acquisition of specific skills, facts, and concepts necessary for the mastery of a particular task or body of knowledge. Informal activities support the acquisition of the attitudes, beliefs, and behavior patterns characteristic of the native master (Cohen, 1971; Scribner and Cole, 1973). Becoming a skilled worker involves formal processes; becoming a big-man or a medicine man involves predominantly informal processes.

Acquiring a Blacksmith's Skills

Interview data with the blacksmiths were bolstered considerably by interviews with other skilled workers. What emerged was a consistent pattern of education associated with learning skilled work in general. The pattern has no name in Kpelle, but resembles closely the idea of apprenticeship.

Jaiwo-Gbala was apprenticed to his mother's brother. At first he only

helped out on occasion by bringing wood for the forge and by operating the bellows. But even before this, Jaiwo remembers sitting on a log at one end of the “shop” and watching his uncle work. At 14 he began a formal apprenticeship that lasted three years. His father “gave” him to his uncle; then, at the end of the apprenticeship, the uncle “gave” him back to his parents. Jaiwo-Gbala first learned to make a knife blade, then a machete; later still he learned to carve wooden handles and to forge the hoe and the adze. These latter two require bending the hot iron, which must be done with care to avoid breaking it. His uncle made few comments while Jaiwo-Gbala was working; only when he had finished a tool would he give a detailed critique. He was not allowed to keep a piece until it was perfect, nor could he make a machete until he had mastered the knife, a hoe until he had mastered the machete, and so on. When he made a mistake or did sloppy work, his teacher would beat and berate him and order him to destroy what he had made. During the apprenticeship, he paid his uncle through his work. He would make tools for people who would, in turn, agree to work on his uncle’s farm. The apprenticeship terminated when Jaiwo-Gbala has mastered all the tools, including those needed in the actual blacksmithing, and he set up his own forge.

Yakpawlo, the second of the two blacksmiths in Gbarngasuakwelle, was “adopted” by his teacher. When he was eight he went with his father and a group of men to bring back a big rock for the blacksmith to use as an anvil. The smith saw him, liked him, and, not having a son of his own, asked Yakpawlo’s father for him. He lived with the smith until he was grown and ready to start his own forge. He too began by working the bellows, graduated to fixing old machetes and knives, and then to fabricating whole tools. When his apprenticeship was complete at 18, his father gave the smith 48 armspan lengths of cloth, two chickens, and a goat. Yakpawlo worked for both his father and the smith until they died; that is, he shared part of his payments with them.

Apprenticeship in Gbarngasuakwelle seems to be limited to situations where complex skills are learned. Observation and imitation as learning techniques are present here as in other simpler types of skill learning. In apprenticeship, however, there is a much greater emphasis on performance, evaluation, and motivation. If a person desires to learn a complex skill, he must be highly motivated. The teacher or master’s high fees added to his tactics of harassment and punishment will scare off all but the most determined. This has the dual effect of limiting the number of individuals who can practice certain skills, guaranteeing a livelihood for those who can, and saves the master from wasting his valuable time on unmotivated or unskilled apprentices. A second conspicuous aspect of apprenticeship is what is missing, that is, compulsion. I found no evidence that young men are marked either by heredity or other circumstances as having to take up a particular skill. There is no caste of weavers, for example, and the son of a blacksmith does not inevitably follow his father’s trade. A Kpelle man can always make a living as a farmer. As new avenues for earning money and prestige that require a much lower “investment” become available, interest in becoming a blacksmith has declined (Lancy, 1977a).

Precursors of Blacksmithing

The process of becoming a blacksmith does not begin with the apprenticeship. Many of the preferred qualities encapsulated in the big-man and medicine man subroles must be acquired earlier and in other contexts; they are not taught at the forge. The field of inquiry is large indeed, but for two reasons I focused primarily, if not exclusively, on children's play. First, play (certain play forms, in particular) was often mentioned by adult informants as being important in shaping proper behavior and attitudes, and, second, a prominent theory used to account for the adaptive significance of play is that it provides a context for the learning and practice of adult skills (see Lancy, in press b). From the beginning of my study, I observed children in play and at an early stage began to pick up precursors of the blacksmith's roles.

A play form common to children aged four to nine is *neé-pele* or make-believe play (Lancy, 1976). *Neé-pele* involves the conscious dramatization of some real life and usually adult activity. Of the many examples of *neé-pele* that were recorded, one depicted a blacksmith. Several children were gathered in an open square in the town, an area designated as the "mother ground" because children habitually play there. A boy of nine fulfills the role of blacksmith. Sticks of varying lengths and thickness represent the tools. He has a rock to use as an anvil and a piece of bamboo that has been partially split along its length serves as a pair of tongs. Two other boys of approximately the same age act as clients bringing scraps of wood and iron and carrying away flat pieces of wood, which are finished machetes. A boy of seven is the assistant; he fetches wood chips for the fire. Two girls, younger than ten, prepare and bring make-believe food for the blacksmith to eat at regular intervals. In addition to reproducing the tools and roles associated with the blacksmith, the children also employ the appropriate vocabulary to designate the tools and the actors; that is, the blacksmith is referred to as "smith" or "old man," the girls as "wife," the assistant as "boy" or "son."

I am not suggesting by this example that the boy playing the role of blacksmith will necessarily grow up to be a blacksmith, but he is at least experimenting with the role, "trying it on for size," and this may be a prerequisite to becoming a blacksmith. One thing he is learning is to handle the social relations aspect of being a blacksmith. He exercises different modes of behavior and address when dealing with clients, wives, and assistant. He is demonstrating the incipient attributes of leadership, of being a big man. My data suggest that the boy who takes the role of blacksmith in such a play will also assume the dominant role in other make-believe situations, such as those representing weaving, farming, and divining.

Play in general provides ample opportunities for children to exercise leadership positions, opportunities that are almost totally lacking in other spheres. In work children are under the close control and direction of their parents, and, while older children may aid in caring for younger siblings, they do not assign or direct them in work. The qualities of a leader in play are similar to those required of an elder or big-man. He must not impose his decisions by force and, in fact, must be rather inconspicuous. He leads by being the first to suggest a new game when the present one is getting boring, by refereeing the

game fairly when disputes arise, and by designating other players to take certain roles or join one team or the other.

The big-man role also requires knowledge of precedent or tradition. As I have demonstrated (Lancy, 1975c, 1977b), Kpelle customs and traditions are encapsulated in stories, songs, and a verbal play form called *Kɔɔɔɔ*. Although the content of this folklore may at first glance bear little resemblance to real life, the situations, characters, and outcomes parallel those found in the society. Folklore serves as a mnemonic device for the storage of social rules, and, not surprisingly, children who habitually exercise leadership positions in play also control larger than average portions of folklore.

Standing midway between play and work is observation. Big-men perform their chores in public and, as a consequence, usually draw an audience that may be composed largely of children. Children gather to watch men at work and are available to run errands or do small chores as the need arises. Many skilled workers in town spoke about how their teachers noticed them always being around watching them at work and so invited them to learn their skill. The importance of this lengthy period of observation is hard to assess in terms of skill learning, but it is clearly part of the enculturation process.

The path to becoming a medicine man is rather circumspect, but it begins with the child's initiation into one of two universal secret societies, the *Pɔɔɔ* for males, the *Sande* for females. The child is taken from home at about eight or nine and led to an enclosed portion of the forest near the town. Here he or she is eaten by *Namu* (roughly translated as devil), who is always masked and in costume. Once inside this bush school, the child is taught very little in terms of facts, but is indoctrinated rather effectively into the web of medicine, secrecy, and ritual that permeates the society. The child's back, arms, and chest are cicatrized, and these permanent scars represent the teeth marks of the devil, who disgorges the children at the end of the indoctrination period. In addition to a new name, the child is expected to have gained a profound respect for the doctrine of *ifa-mo*, which means don't-talk-it, for the efficacy of medicines, and for the awesome power of the *Zos*, who are the paramount medicine men of the town and who run the bush school. Somewhat later boys may join a play secret society called *Bambé*. *Bambé* has all the trappings of the adult secret societies, such as the *Nia* society specializing in hunting down witches, the *Kali-Sali* specializing in medicines to cure snakebite, or the *Gborbilling* society specializing in the control of lightning, but its secret medicines are only used to fool people and cannot cure or harm anyone.

Later still, adolescent boys and girls may join one or more of the voluntary secret societies, such as those just mentioned. Each society has its own stock in trade of medicines, which may be protective, curative, or harmful to an adversary. The *Pɔɔɔ* and *Sande* also have advanced "degrees" that a person may pursue. The process of learning particular medicines and becoming a *Zo* is quite similar to learning the skills of blacksmithing. A master or *Zo* will take an apprentice and step-by-step demonstrate the art of selecting leaves, roots, and bark, of mixing them in the proper proportions, diagnosing an illness, prescribing a cure, and so on. The aspiring blacksmith will not carry this process to its ultimate conclusion, that is, to become a *Zo* himself, but he will,

of necessity, become heavily involved with secret societies and the Zos who run them.

Conclusion

Becoming a blacksmith involves two kinds of processes. Part of the preparation is well defined in time, involves a single specified teacher or model, a particular setting, requires the mastery of several specific skills, is entered into voluntarily and consciously by the apprentice, who must have high motivation to learn and persevere, is defined throughout as work, and has as its outcome the production of a skilled worker. Informal and complementary processes are life-long, involve learning from many individuals and settings, require the mastery of some specific skills, but place main emphasis on the acquisition of personal traits or characteristics, are also largely voluntary, but unconscious, require public restraint rather than overt ambition, and may be defined as play. Finally, while the end result of the apprenticeship is to certify an individual as a skilled worker, the "extracurricular" activities only move a person up the scales of big-man and medicine man, scales that have no fixed end points. Thus, while the term blacksmith denotes the role of skilled worker, it only connotes the roles of big-man and medicine man.

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