Every parent knows the important milestones to rejoice over in a child’s development: rolling over, crawling, walking, uttering the first word—all these are typically memorialised in the middle-class Western parent’s baby diary. They must be universal—right?

The anthropologist of childhood would beg to differ. In Playing on the Mother-ground, Lancy points out that the milestones Westerners look for are as much cultural as biological markers. In many African societies far different occasions may be signalled as critical. The events celebrated for a Ngoni boy include his first nocturnal emission and the eruption of his second set of molars. An important benchmark in many West African societies is ‘weaning from the back’, when a mother no longer carries her child (pp. 24–5). The point is simple but powerful: what we take for granted as natural development is really cultural emphasis.

Lancy’s book offers us a window into how the Kpelle of Liberia construct the experience that feels so natural in the growing up of children. The Kpelle are one of a group of societies that practise elaborate initial rituals for both boys (through the poro initiation society) and girls (through the sande society). Lancy wisely studied the everyday practices that shape the consciousness of Kpelle children over the long period when they are not undergoing ritual initiation.

The quotidian lives of Kpelle children between 6 and 13 years old are well described. The reader easily gains a child’s eye view of Kpelle society, especially as it is lived on the ‘mother ground’—public spaces where children regularly play and ‘everyone keeps an eye on them, succors them when hurt, and admonishes them when they misbehave’ (p. 9). If Hillary Clinton’s book It takes a Village popularised the notion that a society ought to raise its young with a collective sense of responsibility, Lancy’s book shows exactly how such a goal can be achieved. To his credit, Lancy never loses track of the children themselves. Children buying and selling palm nuts or soap in town, children watching with rapt attention as a skilled weaver works at the loom, children marching through town pretending to be a swarm of invading bees, children play-farming with sticks as machetes and dirt as rice, children drawing in the sand, children carrying babies on their backs . . . the lives of Kpelle youth as seen through this book are astonishingly rich and varied, even as poverty circumscribes their aspirations and life possibilities.

In trying to understand indigenous perspectives, Lancy offers us a very local knowledge. The Western reader gains a new appreciation of ‘play’ itself, as what passes for Kpelle children’s ‘play’ shades imperceptibly into ‘work’, and these (Western) categories themselves become deconstructed and (via an African system of classification) reconstructed in theoretically productive ways. For those new to the anthropology of children the second chapter has a brief but helpful overview of the most important work in this century.

At a general level, Lancy aims to show ‘how children in non-Western societies . . . develop into competent members of these societies’ (p. 12). To counterbalance (and perhaps challenge) the common Western emphasis on the parent–child relationship, Lancy concentrates on children’s activities that do not involve parents. The ‘cultural routines’ of the title refer to ‘opportunities for guided and sheltered learning’ (p. 18). Lancy’s analytical framework has its foundation in the writings of Lev Vygotsky, whose work has been adapted by many in cognitive anthropology and child development, since in Lancy’s view it is ‘particularly fruitful in directing the discovery of culture-specific practices of
child rearing and documenting intercultural variation' (p. 23). Chapter 6 confirms Vygotsky's theory of children's games as replicating social hierarchy.

As Western education, the introduction of roads, the increasing reliance on a monetary economy, and so on, change the daily texture of Kpelle lives, children's play is transformed. Lancy 'found evidence of a growing gap between the play behaviour of children in school compared to that of children not attending school' (p. 187). School itself is viewed ambivalently. Kpelle children are attracted to the possibilities of release from a life of farming and domination by elders, while their elders value Western schools as a means to produce educated adults who can protect them from the abuses of government and capitalism.

Lancy also provocatively analyses differences in the child-rearing agendas common among the Kpelle and middle-class Westerners. Figure 2.1 (p. 13) is a devastating visual display of the major values of each of these societies. At the centre of Kpelle society (and, Lancy claims, other agrarian societies that are organised as a gerontocracy) stand two groups—adults and adolescents—surmounted by elders and ancestors at the apex of the triangle, and children at its base. Occupying a parallel space in the United States, between children at the apex of the triangle and parents, grandparents and pets at its base, are the following assorted institutions: pre-schools, paediatricians, Barney, Toys ‘R’ Us, Baby Gap, Dr Spock, neonatal medicine, baby sitters, Gerber’s playgrounds and Disney. This pair of triangles, which destabilises mainstream Western values to wittily critique them, is alone worth the price of the book.

Lancy conducted his Liberian fieldwork in 1967–69 and again in 1973. Lancy does not consider West African ethnography since that period; attention to work by a new generation of strong West African ethnographers working in the past two decades (including those who work in Liberia such as Mary Moran) would have enriched Lancy's discussion. His fieldwork itself was solid, if now dated; Liberia's civil war contributed to preventing Lancy from returning. The study begs for a follow-up, for by the end of the book the reader has come to care about the residents of Gbarngasuakwelle and wishes to know of their fate.

Lancy also inclines toward somewhat reductionist arguments. Thus the major function of Kpelle children's play is to socialise children for adult skills and social roles, and games are 'enculturative devices' (p. 93). The inherent creativity and potential subversiveness of play—a possibility long heralded by Victor Turner, among others—is downplayed, in favour of a model that emphasises reinforcement of the status quo. Happily, the early introduction of a sociobiological model is mostly irrelevant to the ethnography and analysis that follow, which largely overlook that model.

Although not actively engaged with recent debates in African studies, anthropology and elsewhere in the social sciences and humanities concerning the ethics of research and writing, the dynamic construction of culture and the pervasive effects of the global economy, this book is nevertheless a singularly useful contribution to our knowledge of child rearing in Africa. The writing is clear and at times lively where Lancy injects welcome vignettes of individual children and his own reactions to what he observed. In the classroom Lancy's book would serve well in courses on children and/or families in Africa, the anthropology of childhood, the human life cycle, cognitive anthropology or the anthropology of learning. With this and the other volumes in the first-rate series Culture and Human Development edited by Sara Harkness and Charles Super, the anthropology of children has come of age. Despite the weaknesses noted,
the book is a welcome addition to the literature on cultural approaches to child rearing in non-Western settings.

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One of the charms of this book is the self-evident way in which gender emerges as a crucial issue in what some might see as a different topic: the articulation of local and national politics. Goheen describes how, starting from an investigation of politics in Nso, one of the main chiefdoms of the Grassfields (north-west Cameroon), her research soon made it clear that gender relations 'lie at the very heart of both the precolonial and postcolonial political discourse'. She analyses the articulation of these discourses, especially in terms of 'hegemony'. Her main conclusion is that the only real 'counter-hegemonic discourse' against the hierarchies of male power, reproduced by the interaction between local authority and the (post)colonial state, comes from the women. While this might suggest that this is a book *à thèse*—another specimen of what Achille Mbembe once dared to call 'authoritarian North American feminism'—the opposite is true. Goheen's subtle writing convincingly shows that such considerations emerged from the daily practice of her research. This applies both to the choice of hegemony as a central concept and to the focus on gender as crucial in politics.

An interesting aspect of Nso is that 'hegemony' acquires a double meaning here. The Nso chiefdom itself is often quoted in the literature as a potent example of a 'traditional' hegemony. Especially in the course of the nineteenth century, consecutive Nso chiefs succeeded in encapsulating ever more groups and chiefdoms in a remarkably dense framework of authority. Indeed, present-day Nso elites are apt to boast that 'if the Germans had not stopped us, we might have conquered the whole of Cameroon'. The post-colonial state in Cameroon, on the other hand, rapidly acquired hegemonical pretensions of its own, especially under Ahidjo. Goheen builds on Bayart's analysis of Ahidjo's politics as a **projet hégémonique** by showing in more detail how the 'assimilation' of different elites took shape at the regional level. Her question is consequently how the confrontation between these very different forms of hegemony worked out in practice. Interestingly, recent developments show that the balance between the two can rapidly change. Up to the end of the 1980s the chief's power seemed to become ever more subsumed by the new authority of the state. However, the recent implosion of the national **projet hégémonique**—by political liberalisation, but even more by the ever more suffocating economic crisis and subsequent structural adjustment measures—reversed this trend. Goheen's detailed analysis of the turmoil of the 1990s—'Operation Ghost Town', accompanied by further formalisation of the economy—shows how the Nso chief emerged as an alternative centre of power. Nowadays it is the *fon* (chief), rather than the state officials, who assures order and controls crime within Nso. With the active support of the *fon*, Nso emerged as a main centre of opposition to the regime of Biya (Ahidjo's controversial successor).

However, at a deeper level there is complementarity, rather than opposition, between the two hegemonical projects. Of particular interest is Goheen's rich analysis (chapter 6) of how the new elites from Nso, who made their careers in the urban centres outside Nso, became co-opted into the 'traditional' title