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052157546X - Child Care and Culture: Lessons from Africa

Robert A. LeVine, Suzanne Dixon, Sarah LeVine, Amy Richman, P. Herbert Leiderman,
Constance H. Keefer and T. Berry Brazelton

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Child Care and Culture examines parenthood, infancy, and early childhood in an African community, raising provocative questions about “normal” child care. Comparing the Gusii people of Kenya with the American white middle class, the authors show how divergent cultural priorities create differing conditions for early childhood development.

Gusii mothers, who bear ten children on average, focus on goals of survival during infancy and compliance during early childhood, following a cultural model of maternal behavior for achieving these goals. Their practices are successful in a local context but diverge sharply from those considered normal or optimal in North America and Europe, especially in terms of cognitive stimulation, social engagement, emotional arousal, verbal responsiveness, and emotional support for exploration and conversation. Combining the perspectives of social anthropology, pediatrics, and developmental psychology, the authors demonstrate how child care customs can be responsive to varied socioeconomic, demographic, and cultural conditions without inflicting harm on children.

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Child care and culture

Lessons from Africa

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Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521331715

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First published 1994

Reprinted 1996

First paperback edition 1996

Reprinted 1998

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN-13 978-0-521-33171-5 hardback

ISBN-10 0-521-33171-4 hardback

ISBN-13 978-0-521-57546-1 paperback

ISBN-10 0-521-57546-X paperback

Transferred to digital printing 2005

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Foreword

URIE BRONFENBRENNER

This book is about cultural lessons from Africa and from the United States, and what each culture can learn from the other about the forces that shape human character. It offers lessons not only for contemporary developmental science but also for today's societies on both continents. These scientific and social lessons are especially timely, for although some of them were learned – and taught – years ago, in recent decades they have gone out of fashion. Yet, as I shall suggest here, American society may need these lessons more today than ever before in its history.

What has gone out of fashion is summarized in a single word, a concept that from the 50s to the early 70s dominated the study of human development across disciplines in psychology, sociology, and anthropology. That key construct is *socialization*, defined as “the process through which individuals acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that enable them to participate as more or less effective members of groups and the society.”¹ In 1969, an entire handbook of more than 1,000 pages was published on theory and research pertaining to this subject.² But from today's perspective, socialization is no longer of commanding research interest. In the words of a leading contemporary scholar of human development: “After peaking during the 1960s and early 70s, socialization studies began to decline in all areas.”³

Yet, *socialization* is exactly what this new book by Robert A. LeVine and his colleagues is all about. It exploits a dramatic experiment of nature by comparing conditions, processes, and outcomes of early child rearing among the Gusii people of north-eastern Africa and their middle-class counterparts in the north-eastern United States, specifically in Boston, Massachusetts. In a number of respects, the two cultures produce rather different

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kinds of human beings. For example, by contrast with the Americans, the Gusii are much less expressive of their feelings. “They rarely show approval, anger, or shock . . . they avoid disclosing information, particularly pleasurable facts about oneself, which Americans routinely share” (Chap. 1, p. 14). In addition, both children and adults are more compliant to authority, and ask fewer questions. These patterns begin early in life. For instance, the Gusii babies at 3 to 4 months cried less than half of the time that their American counterparts did.

What is most intriguing about the authors’ findings, however, is not the systematic differences in personality that they found but the persuasive evidence and argument they present regarding the forces that give rise to the contrast. These forces operate at two levels – one more proximal and direct, the other more distal, inferential, yet ultimately more powerful. In the more immediate sphere, the differences in personality, which begin to emerge in the very first year of life, and are shown to be the product, in substantial degree, of the contrasting ways in which infants in the two cultures are treated by their mothers.

The distribution . . . across categories is extremely different for the Gusii and Boston mothers: For the Gusii, holding and physical contact are most frequent at all age periods, whereas for the Bostonians, looking and talking are relatively frequent at first and become the most frequent behaviors by 9 months. (Chap. 8, p. 197)⁴

A further contrast is seen in the temporal distribution of maternal attention over the first 2 years.

In the American model . . . it increases over time, as the toddler becomes more capable not only of conversations with the mother but also of attracting and keeping maternal attention through solicitations, demands, long dialogues, displays of accomplishment, tantrums, and other maneuvers of the 2-year old. Having fostered the infant’s capacity for verbal communication and active engagement, the mother finds herself engaged in an expanding relationship with a toddler who sleeps less, talks more, and takes the initiative in interaction. . . .

American mothers frequently use questions to promote the infant’s excited participation in social exchange: They create a protoconversation with repeated questioning, lavishing praise on the infant for each vocal or motor response, which is taken as if

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it were an answer to the question. . . . In terms of the American Pedagogical model, both questions and praise are essential to the encouragement of learning and social engagement in the pre-school child. (Chap. 10, pp. 252–253)

The contrast is highlighted in an analysis by LeVine and his colleagues of a more general aspect of parent–child relationships that has emerged in contemporary research as especially influential in shaping young children’s development: the degree of *reciprocity* between the behavior of the infant and the mother. Here the results reveal that Gusii mothers are less likely than their American counterparts to respond with speech to their babies’ vocalizations or to seek or return eye contact. More generally, the authors find “In comparison with American white middle-class mothers, then, Gusii mothers try to keep their babies calm, avoiding positive or negative arousal states by preventing or dampening excitement” (Chap. 8, p. 201).⁵

But how and why should such a pattern of maternal care arise? It is here that the authors’ second level of analysis comes into play. In their view, the two societies have sharply different cultural goals, which in turn are dictated by historical experience in the environment in which each group has lived. For the Gusii, an especially critical experience over decades has been an extraordinarily high infant death rate, arising from life-threatening illnesses and physical hazards. It is the authors’ first and foremost “distal” hypothesis that, in order to survive, the Gusii culture has placed an exceptionally high value both on having children and providing them with intensive care during the first 2 years of life, when infant survival is most seriously threatened. This value is principally reflected in two domains. The first is one of the highest fertility rates in the world; at the time the fieldwork was carried out, the average woman was bearing about ten children and losing about two. The second value is reflected in the intensive care given to infants during the first 2 years of life (to which the authors give plausible credit for minimizing the losses).

LeVine and his colleagues also have an additional cultural hypothesis. Up to the present time, the Gusii have been a “pastoral-agrarian” society, depending in substantial degree on women to work in the fields while the men attended to the cattle. Consistent with this division of roles, it is customary for mothers to return to work in the second year of a baby’s life.

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Both in preparation for and after this transition, responsibilities for the care of the young are shared in substantial degree by older siblings. The authors argue that, under these circumstances, it also becomes culturally adaptive to minimize the trauma of separation by discouraging the development of a strongly dependent relationship between the mother and the infant. Hence, the early minimalization of overt excitement, pleasurable or painful, in interpersonal contexts.

The authors point out further that the necessity of the mother's early return to work in the fields places a premium on having young children who, as they move beyond early infancy, are easily managed, will not interfere, and will do what they are told without complaint. Accordingly, in Gusii child rearing there is an early emphasis on compliance – at first in terms of refraining from misbehavior or making demands, later in assisting with household tasks and work responsibilities. “Conversations between mother and child are not encouraged or expected. . . . More frequent is the kind of interaction in which a toddler asks for something and the mother gives it, or the mother issues a command and the toddler obeys with action, not words” (Chap. 10, p. 254).

From the perspective of Gusii cultural values, this pattern of socialization has obvious advantages: “Gusii parents expect to benefit from having children who are easy to manage as infants, participate in domestic production during childhood, and continue to help their parents as adults” (Chap. 10, p. 264).

In sum, we have the authors' first general thesis: Gusii modes of early socialization are culturally adaptive. Or at least they *were* so. The qualification is the authors' own:

But parental practices that are adaptive or effective under one set of historical conditions may not be so when conditions change. The Gusii goal of maximizing the number of surviving children made more adaptive sense at the onset of the 20th century, when mortality was high, landholdings were large, and children were available to work under parental control, than 75 years later, when most of the children survived, land was scarce, and children's futures depended on school attendance and employment rather than working for parents. In other words, Gusii reproductive and child care practices viewed as a parental investment strategy had lost much of their basis in economic utility by the 1970s. (Chap. 10, p. 269)

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Viewing Gusii culture “from the American middle-class perspective,” the authors point to other possible costs as well:

failure to prepare the child for schooling through the early development of language skills, self-confidence, and assertiveness, and an excessive emphasis on compliance to authority instead of equality and independence – thus leaving the child without the skills and virtues thought to be needed in the modern world. (Chap. 10, pp. 264–265)

LeVine and his colleagues contend, however, that “at the level of practice . . . a different understanding emerges. . . . Despite the ideological emphasis on respect and obedience, then, the practical system of control over children has always been loose, and it was expected by parents that their children would misbehave in the pastures and other places outside the home” (Chap. 10, p. 266). In the authors’ view, this freedom, both alone and in the peer group, combined with the self-discipline and skills gained through subsequent apprenticeship – first within, and then beyond the family, in the larger community – can counteract the influence of an earlier, more restrictive emotional and cognitive environment. In support of this conclusion, LeVine and his colleagues note that, in a follow-up conducted when the children were 13 to 14, “there were no glaring mental defects or psychiatric abnormalities” (Chap. 10, p. 273) and that the “sample as a whole seemed average in their academic performance, with almost two-thirds at or near their proper grade level. . . . There is evidence of resilience here that warns against exaggerating the influence of the early years and emphasizes the importance of greater exactitude in our assumptions concerning what that influence is – and what it is not” (Chap. 10, p. 268).

In the spirit of that same “greater exactitude,” one can learn still more from LeVine’s much-needed socialization perspective. First, along with change, there is evidence for continuity, for despite the liberating influence of experiences in later childhood and adolescence, as adults the Gusii still manifest the restraint of emotional expression rooted in modes of maternal care from their earliest infancy. And although the majority of the children in the sample were able to perform satisfactorily in the rural primary schools of 1980s Kenya, “this does not mean that . . . [they] were performing at the level of their urban middle-class

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counterparts in Nairobi, Europe, or North America” (Chap. 10, p. 268).

Nevertheless, there remains the powerful subtitle that the authors have selected for their book: “Lessons from Africa.” The implication, of course, is that these lessons are primarily *for* the United States. LeVine and his co-authors never say explicitly what these lessons are, but I shall presume to do so for them. Here and there throughout this volume, and especially in the last chapter, one senses the implication that, with all the problems besetting the well-being and development of children in Gusii society, their culture contains a resource for psychological growth lacking in our own.

What might that resource be? Clearly, it does not lie in the domain of maternal fostering of the infant’s “capacity for active engagement, promoting excited participation in social exchange, and lavishing praise for each vocal or motor response, which is taken as if it were an answer to the question.” On the contrary, that is presumably our own culture’s powerful discovery for developing psychological competence in the next generation. LeVine and his colleagues come close to saying so, but stop short – and for good reason.

As I have documented elsewhere,⁶ there is evidence that such processes of progressively more complex reciprocal interaction between mother and infant – and, more generally, between adults and children – are breaking down in American society. They are becoming both less frequent, and less powerful in their impact. One major reason is that a key requirement for their operation is not being met; namely, to be effective, *they must take place on a fairly regular basis over extended periods of time*. Only then can patterns of reciprocal interaction exert a cumulative developmental effect, and become internalized as sources of motivation and direction for one’s future life course. Today, the hectic pace and increasing chaos of contemporary American life undermine the evolving consistency and continuity that are essential for psychological growth. And it is precisely this necessary degree of stability that is still to be found in more traditional cultures, such as that of the Gusii people. Therein lies perhaps the most important cultural lesson from us to them, and from them to us. We are indebted to Robert LeVine and his colleagues for helping to bring that lesson home, where it most belongs.

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NOTES

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2. Goslin, D. A. (1969). *Handbook of Socialization Theory and Research*. Chicago: Rand McNally.
3. Elder, G. H., Jr. (1993). Time, human agency, and social change: Perspectives on the life course. *Cooley-Mead Lecture*, American Sociological Association, August 1993.
4. Indeed, in each of these contrasting categories the proportion of time spent by mothers in one culture is more than twice as great as that for mothers in the other (see Tables 8.1, 8.2, 8.3).
5. As already noted, it would appear that the effort is successful. In this connection, the authors cite an incident in which Gusii mothers became upset while viewing a videotape of an American mother changing a diaper, with the infant screaming on the changing table. "They saw the American mother as incompetent" (Ch. 6, p. 149).
6. Bronfenbrenner, U. (1989). *Who Cares for Children?*. Invited Address to UNESCO. Bilingual publication No. 188. Paris: Unit for Co-operation with UNICEF and WFP; Bronfenbrenner, U. (1992). Child care in the Anglo-Saxon Mode. In M. E. Lamb, K. Sternberg, C. P. Hwang, & A. G. Broberg (Eds.), *Child Care in Context: Cross-Cultural Perspectives* (pp. 281–291). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum; Bronfenbrenner, U. (1993). The Ecology of Cognitive Development: Research Models and Fugitive Findings. In R. H. Wozniak & K. Fischer (Eds.), *Specific Environments: Thinking in Contexts* (pp. 3–44). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum; Bronfenbrenner, U. & Ceci, S. J. (1993). Heredity, Environment and the Question "How?": A New Theoretical Perspective for the 1990's. In R. Plomin & G. E. McClearn (Eds.), *Nature, Nurture, and Psychology* (pp. 313–324). Washington, DC: APA Books.

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Acknowledgments

The Gusii Infant Study involved a group of research collaborators and received assistance from numerous agencies and individuals. Financial support for the fieldwork came from the National Science Foundation (SOC 74-12692), the National Institute of Mental Health (Research Career Scientist Award to Robert A. LeVine), and Children's Hospital Medical Center in Boston; support for analysis, writing, and comparative analyses came from the National Science Foundation (BNS 77-09007), the Spencer Foundation, and the Population Council (Subordinate Agreement CP 82.47A). In Kenya, we were helped by Dr. Albert Maleche, Director of the Bureau of Educational Research, then of the University of Nairobi, who provided the institutional affiliation through which the project received permission from the Government of Kenya to conduct research. In Kisii, the project received support from the District Commissioner, D. O. Mulama, and from many Gusii notables, including Simeon Nyachae, Lawrence Sagini, and Dr. Zakariah Onyonka (the first two of whom had worked with Robert LeVine in the 1950s). We are grateful to all of them.

The study in Kisii District involved a complex data collection program combined with the operation of a pediatric clinic for the research population. Pediatric service was provided by American physicians: T. Berry Brazelton, Suzanne Dixon, David Feigal, Constance Keefer, and P. Herbert Leiderman, all of whom doubled as developmental investigators. The project depended on a staff of Gusii field assistants. Some were local residents of the area we call Morongo in this book – Christopher Getoi, Joseph Obongo, Agnes Nyabeta, Clemencia Otara, Ruben Sosi Sabani, Anna Getoi, and Dinah Orora. Others were students at the University of Nairobi or other educational institutions who worked with us for varying lengths of time: Joel Momanyi, John Orora,

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Teresa Monari, Drucilla Ombui, Agnes Nyandika, Truphena Onyango, Mary Kephay Ayonga. A non-Gusii student from Cambridge University, Edmund Law, worked as a volunteer field assistant during 1976. All contributed significantly to the research presented in this book.

In analyzing the data from the project, we were assisted by many students and colleagues, including James Caron, Rebecca New, Patrice Miller, Josephine Yaman, Susan Templeton, Hsiao-Ti Falcone, Roseanne Kermoian, Guy Reed, and Elizabeth Momanyi. Justus Ogembo provided ethnographic advice at a late stage in the manuscript preparation.

There are many others who helped make this book possible, including Michael Hennessy, M.D., an adventurous orthopedic surgeon who provided unique services at the Kisii General Hospital, conducted research on Gusii children's gait (Hennessy, Dixon, & Simon, 1984), and took some of the photographs appearing herein; Eliza Klein, who took some of the other photographs for the book; Edward Z. Tronick, Gloria Leiderman, Audrey Naylor, M.D., and Renate Lellep Fernandez, who gave helpful advice; Bambi Schieffelin and two anonymous reviewers for Cambridge University Press, who also did so; and the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study in the Social Sciences, in Uppsala, who provided Robert A. LeVine with the time, space, and facilities to bring the manuscript to completion.

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A prosperous Gusii father with his first wife and three of their nine children at her house in Morongo. His other wife lives and works at his shop in town 7 miles away. Photograph by Eliza Klein.

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A Gusii homestead (*omochie*) with several houses and outbuildings. Each residential house (*enyomba*) has a thatched roof with a steeple (*egechuria*), the latter signifying that a man *owns* the house, though it is uniquely identified with one of his wives. The mud walls of the nearer houses have worn away, revealing their wattle frames. A woman stands in the yard; behind her is a granary (*ekiage*) with a metal roof. Photograph by Michael Hennessy.

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A Gusii mother holds her infant child, as one of her children tries to play with the baby. Children are considered appropriate playmates for babies, but mothers are not. Photograph by Eliza Klein.

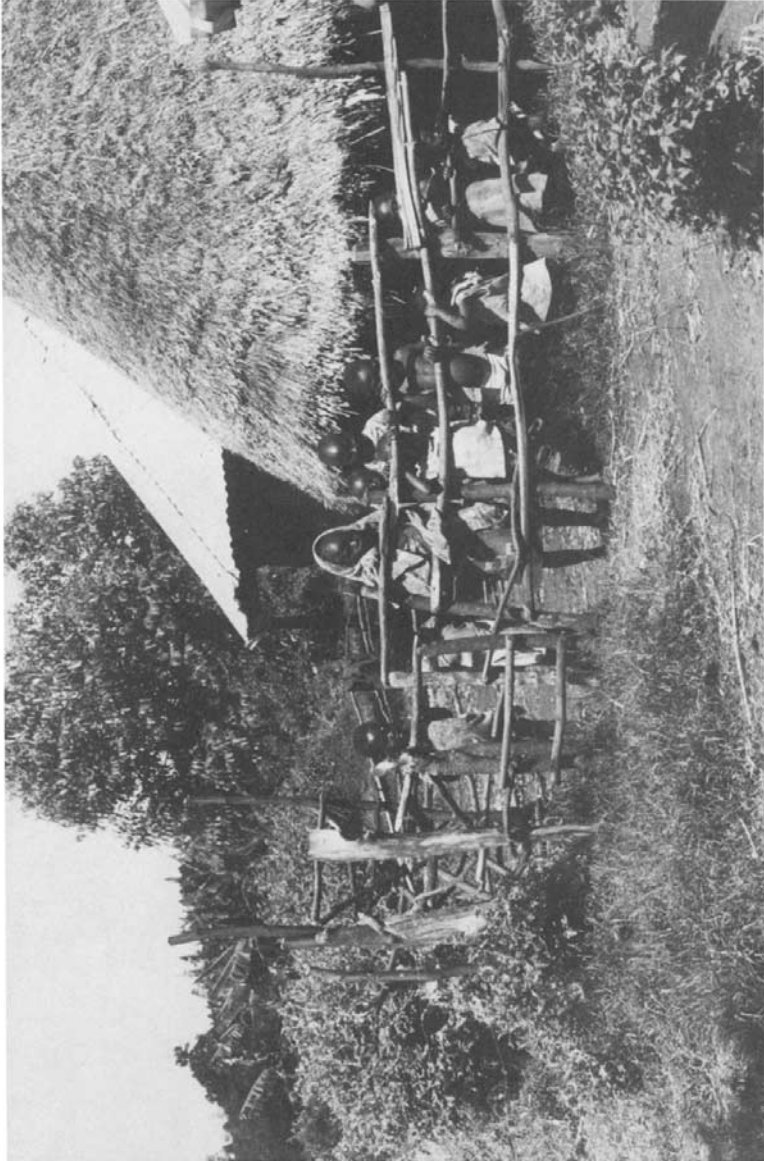
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A group of siblings and half-siblings from one homestead. Gusii children spend their days with children older and younger than themselves. Photograph by Eliza Klein.

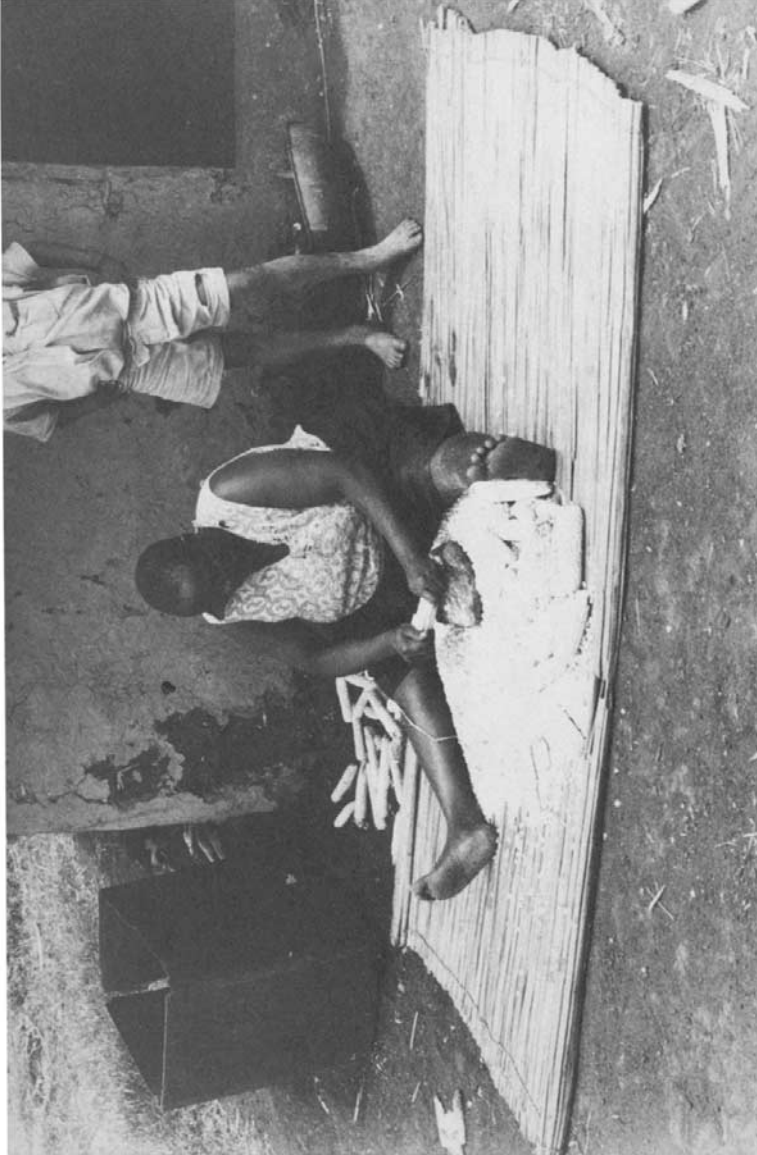
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A woman shelling maize as her son looks on. Food-processing is a major responsibility of Gusii women. Photograph by Sarah LeVine.

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A sample mother sitting with her baby gives a small bowl to her toddler, telling him to carry it elsewhere. This is deliberate training in obedience to maternal commands. Photograph by Eliza Klein.

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Siblings in a maize field near their house. The two children at the ends are wearing school uniforms.
Photograph by Sarah LeVine.

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The yard of a house is the family center of daytime activity and social interaction. Maize kernels dry on wooden trays (*chingambo*) in front of the house, as chickens wander freely and children of all ages converse. Photograph by Sarah LeVine.

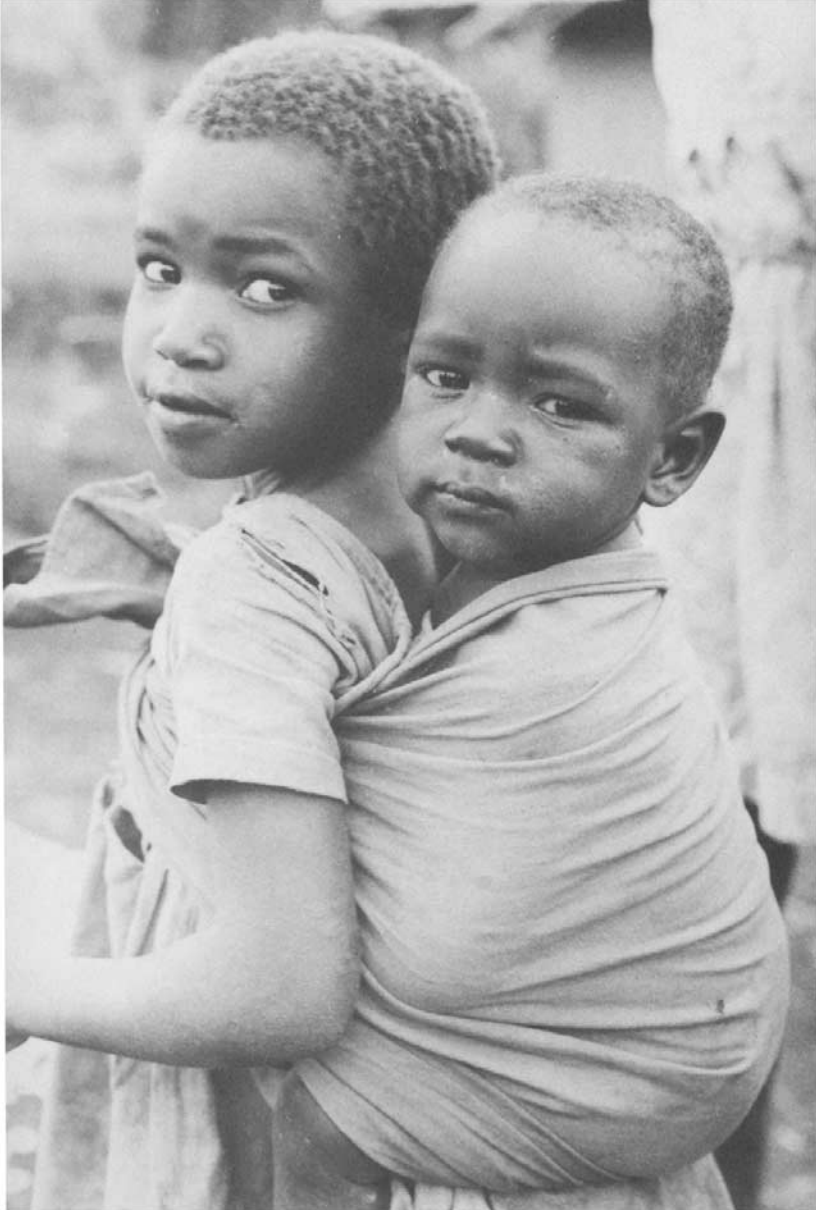
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Day care: The *omoreri* (child nurse) carries her infant brother, keeping him out of harm's way and giving him constant access to a source of comfort. Photograph by Eliza Klein.

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The elders (*abagaaka*) drink hot millet-beer (*amarwa*) from a common pot and discuss community affairs. Such gatherings of senior men represent moral and spiritual authority in the local patrilineage (*riiga*) and operate as the first level of governance beyond the homestead. Photograph by Sarah LeVine.