CITY WALLS AND CAMPUS GROVES IN NORTHERN NIGERIA:
A PROFILE OF PARENTING IN THE FIELD

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INTRODUCTION

While we frequently fail to pay sufficient attention to the effects on research of our involvement as families in the field, as parents we are usually vitally concerned with the effects of the field experience on our children and on our functioning as parents. Parenting in a cross-cultural setting is especially challenging because the home society's physical and institutional support system is removed along with the widely shared understandings that provide clear normative bench marks for parent and child alike. In the field we are often our children's major culture brokers--explaining the host culture, arranging opportunities to meet local children, listening to personal adjustment problems, and helping resolve misunderstandings with peers and teachers. Playing this mediating and interpretive role effectively demands social skills and an informed sensitivity to the nuances of the host society that ought to be standard equipment for all anthropologists. As anthropologists we may take cultural differences in stride, but for young children discontinuities between the home and the outside world may be bewildering and upsetting. As anthropologist-parents we should be especially alert to these discontinuities and better equipped than laymen to cushion their culture shock. This special alertness to cultural discontinuities can become a powerful research tool as well.

There may be however, severe tension between two of the roles we are called to play during fieldwork with children--that of socializing parent and that of dispassionate observer. Struggle as we may to be faithful cultural relativists and neutral mediators, we often find ourselves defenders and sustainers of our own cultural traditions when we have our children in the field. Since we are usually our child's primary source of his home culture, we feel a heavy responsibility to transmit it faithfully in all
its depth and variety to him. Like most parents, we take pride in being reminded that our child resembles us, and like other migrants in far-off lands, we harbor the secret fear that he may turn out to be rather different from our expectations. As anthropologists, however, we may take the concern with cultural discontinuities one step further than other migrants. Parenting outside our home culture forces us to confront a host of fundamental issues and assumptions on a day-to-day basis that we seldom ask outside the realm of theoretical and philosophical speculation: What are the objectives of our own culture's socialization practices and what values do they embody? How sound are these values and how effective are our strategies for implementing them? What sort of person do I want my child to be or does he want to become? What are the effective limits of my responsibility or right to intervene in his life to achieve these objectives?

The issues and problems to be discussed here all concern the reciprocal relationships of parenting and research in a cross-cultural setting. They include the following: the relevance of all aspects of our own and others' social personhood to the participant observation that is the source of our cultural insight; the way children increase our involvement in, and understanding of, local social life and cultural meaning; the role of our families in illuminating new issues in ethnicity, my long-standing research interest; the extent of our right and ability to direct our child's acquisition of culture; and the relations between a child's adjustment process in the host society and his or her readjustment at home. After an introductory section about my family and its adjustment to Nigerian society, the text will be divided between the results of reflecting upon my own involvement as parent and researcher in the field and the insights that result from observing my children's participation in the host society.

All of these issues have been of special concern to my wife and myself during the course of my two years of research and university teaching here in northern Nigeria, where this account has been written. All this is, therefore, still very much a part of our lives, and I have had little opportunity to reflect on them with the detached objectivity of the returned, recuperated anthropologist. However, the immediacy of our experience gives special insight which often fades or loses its relevance after leaving the field.

PREPARATION AND ADAPTATION

I am a Euro-American from the Midwest who had worked as a Peace Corps volunteer (1963-65) in southeastern Nigeria prior to my doctoral research in Cameroon (1971-73). My wife, Susanna is of Banyang ethnic origin from northwestern Cameroon, an area with close historical and cultural links to Nigeria, especially the southeastern part where I had been in the Peace Corps. We arrived in Kano, Nigeria, in October 1981 with our two children--Nina, our five-year-old daughter, and Alan, our one-year-old son--and at the time of this writing have been in the field for nearly two