

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Making beautiful babies: Performative parenting, parental determinism, and personhood in Côte d'Ivoire

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Abstract

According to the notion of "parental determinism," parents are paradoxically imagined as both powerful actors and in need of expert guidance and supervision. Subsequent research in different world regions problematizes the links between parental competence, child development, and societal ills. However, the question of what "good parenting" actually consists of is highly contingent. Based on ethnographic fieldwork among Ivorian parents and in a child welfare center, this paper examines competitive comparisons in baby shows, pregnancy consultations, and infant health reviews as performative parenting encounters in which parents, social welfare officers, and midwives interact as actors and audiences of "good parenting." The paper analyzes contemporary parental determinism in Côte d'Ivoire as at once rooted in well-established local imaginaries of self and personhood and opening spaces for the development of aspirational parental selves. It looks at different ways in which parental determinism is enacted and talked about and how "doing good" as a parent and the well-being of children are grasped as entangled and mutually constitutive. The paper demonstrates that "beautiful babies" are a product of a shared understanding and co-practice. Making "beautiful babies" requires communal efforts to "be good" and "do good," invoking the subjectivities of both parents and experts alongside their acts of parenting and counseling.

KEYWORDS

aspiration, comparison, parenting, performativity, personhood

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Abstract French

Selon la notion de « déterminisme parental », les parents sont paradoxalement imaginés à la fois comme des acteurs puissants et comme ayant besoin de conseils d'experts et de supervision. Des recherches ultérieures dans différentes régions du monde problématisent les liens entre la compétence parentale, le développement de l'enfant et les maux sociétaux. Cependant, la question de ce en quoi consiste réellement une « bonne parentalité » est hautement contingente. Basé sur un travail ethnographique auprès de parents ivoiriens et dans un centre de protection de l'enfance, cet article examine les comparaisons compétitives dans les concours de bébés, les consultations prénatales et les examens de santé infantile comme des rencontres performatives de parentalité dans lesquelles parents, travailleurs sociaux et sages-femmes interagissent en tant qu'acteurs et publics de la « bonne parentalité ». L'article analyse le déterminisme parental contemporain en Côte d'Ivoire comme étant à la fois enraciné dans des imaginaires locaux bien établis du soi et de la personne, et ouvrant des espaces pour le développement de sois parentaux aspirationnels. Il examine différentes façons dont le déterminisme parental est mis en œuvre et discuté, et comment « faire le bien » en tant que parent et le bien-être des enfants sont saisis comme entrelacés et mutuellement constitutifs. L'article démontre que les « beaux bébés » sont le produit d'une compréhension partagée et d'une co-pratique. Faire des « beaux bébés » nécessite des efforts communautaires pour « être bon » et « faire le bien », invoquant les subjectivités des parents et des experts parallèlement à leurs actes de parentalité et de conseil.

INTRODUCTION

In the first trimester, I give Vermox against parasites and worms, because the mother's inside is the baby's house, it needs to be clean. You always have to keep your house clean, but if you are expecting a visitor, you do an extra sweeping, right? Thus, these are medicaments to sweep the baby's house, for it be clean, really clean. [...] Then, in the beginning of the third trimester I give them injections [of a broad-spectrum antibiotic] to clean everything: the house, the baby, everything... it also helps during labor, the child comes out nicely, clean, it won't be sick and it will be intelligent, it will walk quickly... it is really good. [...] I don't force, but I recommend. (Interview, Mme Assouman, Abidjan, July 2018)

Madame Assouman¹ is a retired midwife, living and working in an aspiring middle-class neighborhood in Abidjan, the capital of Côte d'Ivoire.² During my fieldwork in Abidjan in 2017 and 2018, I repeatedly stayed in a chamber of her courtyard, where she also received her patients. This allowed me not only to witness many of her counseling sessions but also to spend many hours in the evenings chatting with her about parenting matters. And indeed, Mme Assouman's counseling was much more encompassing

than “just” midwifery.³ She would give advice on all kinds of family matters, since, she claimed, a child could only be as “good” as the family it lived in. Her recommendations often took the form of atrocity stories about women who had refused her counsel or did not want the injections and whose children “came out bizarre” or fathers who did not live up to their paternal responsibilities and whose children would become “gangsters,” spoiling the reputation of the whole family. It was not sufficient to be a caring and loving parent: one also had to be a competent parent—and this involved making conscious use of expert guidance and taking the right decisions on behalf of one’s children. Whereas to some degree one *did* become a parent through the child’s birth, one also had to acquire the status of being a parent through “performance”—an idea reflected in the very concept of parenting, or *parentalité*, the art of being a parent (see Drotbohm & N’Guessan, 2025). The links between cleanliness, beauty, “goodness,” and parental subjectivities, as evoked in the quote above, are crucial in that regard, since parenting is not only a public performance (see N’Guessan, 2022; see also Feldman-Savelsberg, 2025) but also performative, in the sense that it brings about a state of being through repetitive acts of doing “good.”

Mme Assouman’s counseling corresponded to the idea of early childhood development that had recently spread as part of international development programs all over the global South, promoted, for example, by UNICEF (2017), and disseminated into national health structures and child welfare. Early childhood development schemes, too, are based on the idea that what parents do is causally linked to the future well-being of the child. However, the question of what “good parenting” actually consists of is much less unambiguous than global early childhood development programs claim (see Scheidecker et al., 2023). Through donor-based programs, the psychology of child development, positive parenting, and attachment theory have disseminated all over the world and shape contemporary parent–expert interactions in Africa as elsewhere. In Côte d’Ivoire, the NGO (nongovernmental organization) TRECC (funded by the Jacobs Foundation) promotes a positive parenting program, particularly in rural areas in the west of the country. It trains local health staff and social officers in the principles of positive parenting, stating that the “first 1,000 days in the life of a child” determine its future development. Mme Assouman was not (or rather was no longer) part of national health structures that promote healthy childhood. Yet her counseling mirrored some of the underlying assumptions of early childhood development and—to some extent—local ideas about the link between cleanliness and morality and inner and outer beauty.

I suggest that it is valuable to look at these (contested and competing) normativities of good parenting as complementary in order to understand how they shape parental practice and subjectivities in contemporary Côte d’Ivoire. I refer to this entanglement using the broader terms “performative parenting”—grasping parenting as something that relates practices of childcare to parental selves—and “parental determinism” (Furedi, 2002)—the idea that what parents do determines the child’s physical, mental, and moral health and beauty. This paper’s purpose, then, is to clear the notion of parenting, and in particular “parental determinism,” from its universalizing tendencies and explore it as an analytic tool (see Fonseca, 2025). In addressing parenting as performative, I do not claim that it is all “performance,” in the sense of putting something on display, rather—and in line with the theoretical layout sketched in the introduction to this special issue—I argue that “normative parenting is always performative, in the sense of bringing about or contesting the state of being “good,” rather than just [...] mirroring societal norms” (see Drotbohm & N’Guessan, 2025). In order to support that claim, I examine parenting encounters in which parents, social welfare officers, and midwives interact as actors and audiences of “good parenting” (see also Feldman-Savelsberg, 2025). Analyzing what kind of mothers, fathers, and parenting experts are produced in these encounters (de Koning et al., 2022) and “what moral obligations are entailed in these categories” (Faircloth, Hoffman and Layne, 2013, 8) helps to disentangle the complex interplay of competing or contested normativities of parenting. In what follows, I will first provide details about the research setting and methodology before looking at different ways that parental determinism is enacted and talked about, and how “doing good” as a parent and the well-being of children are grasped as entangled and mutually constitutive. The second section analyzes baby shows, infant health reviews, and counseling sessions as encounters in which parental competence and capability are compared and measured. The third section examines aspirational strategies of parental selves building a better life through their chil-

dren and the limits to this. This leads to an analysis of the genealogy of parental determinism in Côte d'Ivoire, see-sawing between emic concepts of child development and middle-class aspirational parental practice.

RESEARCH SETTING AND METHODS

My analysis is based on ethnographic fieldwork among middle-class parents in Côte d'Ivoire between 2017 and 2018. I spent time with families in the metropole region of Abidjan (including Bingerville and Grand Bassam); in Bouaké, the country's third-largest city in the center-north; and in Bongouanou, a mid-sized town in southeastern Côte d'Ivoire. Participant observation, narrative interviews, and sharing in the daily routines of parents and parental experts such as midwife Mme Assouman form the core basis of my data. With the aim of approaching the field from complementary perspectives, I subsequently did an additional 3 months of fieldwork as a participant observer in the Centre Social,⁴ a child welfare center in Bongouanou.

My research interlocutors all belonged to the middle classes and could afford to make choices about what kind of family life they wanted to live that were not exclusively dominated by economic restraints. To different degrees, they all made use of parenting-related consumption (e.g., sending their children to private schools) as a way of (aspirational) middle-classing (Chipkin, 2013; see also Feldman-Savelsberg, 2025).⁵ Many worked as public or civil servants, in health or the judicial sector, or as teachers or journalists. Many of them had—as a part of their professional trajectories—moved several times within Côte d'Ivoire. In most cases, interethnic and sometimes interreligious marriages added complexity to the contestation of family norms. I spent intense time in the households of five families (two in Abidjan, two in Bongouanou, and one in Bouaké) learning about their family life through participant observation. After a short field trip alone, I later brought my own children to the field and tried to share as much as possible with my informants about the emotional and bodily labor of taking care of children, teaching them, feeding them, and making sure they lacked nothing. Many intimate insights into self-reflective and critical conceptions of parenthood were born out of this particularly demanding way of doing fieldwork.

My research was greatly shaped by the fact that I am married to an Ivorian man and raising children considered by many of my research partners to be “Ivorian”—opening a Pandora's box of unsolicited advice that provided me with invaluable insights into parenting as contested practice. That being said, this paper at least partly reflects thinking about performative parenting from an inside perspective. Not only did I think about what it meant to raise “Ivorian children,” I also became part of extended family structures and moral expectations through raising these children in both intimate and semipublic settings.

My research at the Centre Social was driven by an attempt to understand how parenting professionals interacted with parents and which practices shaped their ideas of what constitutes “good parenting.” I participated in many more or less bureaucratic procedures, staff meetings, report writing, casework, and cooperating with other actors in the field (gendarmerie, judiciary, NGOs, community partners), as well as numerous parenting encounters, in which I focused on the perspective of the “experts.” These two strands of research (among mostly middle-class parents and among middle-class public servants working with mostly working-class parents) complemented one another, shedding light on how middle-class aspirational ideas of good parenting shaped parenting interventions on a broader level.

COMPETITIVE COMPARISON: GOOD PARENTING AND ITS AUDIENCES

In 2013, long before parenting became the focus of my research, I observed a “Beautiful Baby Contest” in Bongouanou. It was part of the regional celebrations of independence day, which were the subject of my research back then. The contest had been advertised on local radio and at the infant health reviews of the Centre Social. What follows is based on a retrospective rereading of my fieldnotes with regard to the making of “good mothers” in public performances.

I sat under a canopy providing shade from the hot midday sun, together with women from different state bodies. On my left, Mme Kassoum, teacher at the Lycee Moderne of Bongouanou, and behind me, two women working at the sous-prefecture of Bongouanou town are commenting on the babies that are now being presented one after the other by their mothers. “Look at this cutie,” Mme Kassoum squeaks as candidate number four, a spick-and-span chubby boy with a toothless grin, is presented on stage, dancing in the arms of his mother, with matching new *pagne* (African waxprint) clothes. “This is the magic of breast milk,” one of the other women explains, adding, “if a mother eats well, her milk gets creamy and makes babies fat and cute.” With my other ear, I overhear the MC of the ceremony explain, “All babies are cute, but what makes a baby victory-cute is its state of care,” which is why the jury had decided to add an additional criterion for their judgment: only those mothers who provided the child’s father’s name in the *carnet d’enfant* (a booklet each child is given at birth where examinations and vaccinations during infancy are documented) would be eligible for the award. Throughout the ceremony, all official speeches had been in French. But at this point, Mme Assé, the president of the regional women’s association, who functioned as both a gatekeeper and broker between state bodies and local women, got up, whispering something into the ear of the MC, after which she took to the stage, translating what seemed important to her into Agni for all women to understand. When the jury explained that babies could be awarded only if their mothers had attended all postpartum examinations (especially the 6-week examination at the hospital) and participated regularly in the baby weighing sessions of the Centre Social, as documented in the child’s *carnet d’enfant*, she translated: “A beautiful [nîmi] baby, a good [kpà] baby, is a baby that has been cared for officially, according to the scheme, according to the experts.”⁶ Her announcement that only babies with “paper fathers” were eligible for the award led to some murmuring among the women in the audience, whereas the mothers on display seemed to take it without any reaction.

What seems surprising at first sight is in fact part and parcel of many of these shows, which judged not only (maybe not even predominantly) the child’s beauty but also their parents’ caring capabilities and willingness to obey policy with regard to “good” parenthood.⁷ In the context of the baby show, taking good care of a baby required not only that a mother nourish and groom the baby but also that she adhere to cultural norms of appropriate mothering (e.g., breastfeeding the baby with “creamy milk”), to official state policy (giving the father’s name in the child’s papers), and to expert advice (attending regular health visits). Instead of referring solely to outer appearance, beauty was grasped as “goodness” and as the result of parental competence and moral goodness. In her translation of what qualified a baby as *nîmi*, Mme Assé made use of the additional adjective *kpà* to make this link explicit. Mothers were good when they gave birth to children within marriage, providing the child with the name of a father in its papers, and fathers were good if they acknowledged their parentage and took responsibility for caring (financially) for their offspring.⁸ From conversations with civil servants and social officers, I was familiar with complaints that as a matrilineal society, the Agni found it unimportant to “officialize” fatherhood (by giving the father’s name on birth certificates and other official documents), sometimes making it difficult to hold fathers to account for unwanted pregnancies and their unwanted children’s schooling.⁹ However, unlike a birth certificate, the *carnet d’enfant* has no legally binding power, and children not born in a hospital or a *maternité* do not even possess one. This criterion was therefore definitely a means of “educating” the population toward what was regarded as “good” or “morally right” behavior—according not to custom or state policy but the center’s own normativities.

Skimming through my fieldnotes on the baby contest, I could not help but think that in reality it was not the babies who were on display but the parents (more precisely, the mothers), who seemed to use the stage to perform their own “moral” beauty. Performativity in this sense refers to the making of “good mothers” through successful parenting, with the child—the beautiful baby—providing the object of comparison, and public encounters such as the baby contest organized by the Centre Social as the “stage.” At the same time, the scene seemed to complicate the universalizing model of parental determinism, as promoted by NGOs and local state structures. Was the baby’s beauty proof of its mother’s goodness? Or was the mother’s goodness beautifying the baby? Were these things separable at all? When I came back to Bongouanou in 2017 with the aim of studying changing parenting practices and normativities, I turned to the Centre Social as a starting point. As I soon figured out, here was an institution that had somewhat

routinized the beautiful baby contest as a public measuring of parental competence. Every Wednesday, the Centre Social opened its doors for weekly infant health reviews (in public parlance referred to as the “baby weighing”). Held in a large room with benches where mothers waited their turn, watching the consultations of other mothers’ infants as if they were in a theater, the baby weighing choreographed the consultation into a public exam that the mother had to pass, with her child the object of investigation. When the center opened its doors at around 8:30 a.m., a number of women were usually already gathered in front of the building, hoping to be first in line. Some had left their villages on the outskirts of the subprefecture of Bongouanou on foot in the early hours; others had been dropped off by their husbands on motorbikes on the way to work. Others again would come by later, once they had taken their elder children to school or sent their maids to the market. The atmosphere at the Centre Social on Wednesdays was special: very lively, a bit festive even, with crowds of mothers turning up, chatting, putting their babies on display, and socializing with other women and with the child welfare officers from other units, who would also pop by to help Monsieur Kouacou, the officer in charge of the baby weighing when it was particularly crowded. Even though the aim of the practice could be read as an almost violent and intimidating procedure of having to pass a public exam, the atmosphere at the Centre Social certainly would not support such reading.¹⁰

Comparison¹¹ was the major *modus operandi* of the baby weighing, and it had several dimensions. In terms of the temporal dimension, babies were compared first with their own past (by means of a growth curve) and second with the statistical norm, as depicted in the child health review booklet. The booklet, with its pre-established categories of what a child should be able to do at what age, created “good” children as those within the norm and problematized outliers as demanding intervention. By fulfilling normative expectations through good care work, parents performed “being parents” and were accredited the commendation of “good” parenting (see Keller, 2007, 121, for similar observations on the judgment of “age-appropriate development” in child health reviews). This is no different from metrication in the child development and health sector elsewhere (see e.g., Feldman-Savelsberg, 2015, 216ff. on child health reviews as a way to measure parental competence). What is different is that these consultations took place in a public space. So a third dimension of comparison was added—one built upon the co-presence of an audience (other mothers and their babies). More than once, social officers would point at another woman and her baby, making a comment such as, “Look, this is what a four-month-old-baby should look like.” Evaluating parental competence was thus at least implicitly competitive. Other parents were not only the audience, not only recipients of guidance and counseling, but also co-counselors and thus co-producers of normativities of good parenthood. While waiting their turn, mothers actively compared their babies’ weight, development, motor skills, and character and thus turned the consultation into a competitive event. Mothers consciously used the “stage” of the baby weighing to perform their mothering capabilities (not so differently from the baby show). They admired the spick-and-span, “fat” babies, nicely dressed and adorned, displaying motor skills and social abilities average for their age. Whereas other forms of parental competition (such as choice of schooling) are highly dependent on parents’ economic resources, every mother who came regularly to the baby weighing could be praised as a good, capable mother; whether she was the wife of the school director or a peasant woman did not matter *per se*. This is at least partly due to the fact that the Centre Social provided the space and proposed criteria upon which to measure success, but in the interstices of this space, mothers developed and used their own ways of comparing and performative parenting that lay outside of the control of social officers. Parents were not passive recipients of state policies of good parenthood. They actively and consciously used the stage offered by the child welfare officers’ intervention and services to display competing definitions of motherly competence and fatherly care and to assert their own agendas. Responding attentively to what they believed was expected from them, they reappropriated the expert services that at first sight seemed to diminish their parental competence in such a way as to appear informed, responsible, and competent.

Let me illustrate this with another semi-public parent–expert encounter highlighting these more aspirational aspects of performative parenting. Monsieur Kouacou, senior social officer and specialist in infant nutrition at the Centre Social, had summoned a few mothers whose infants he had singled out during the weekly baby weighing sessions as not developing as expected.¹² The mothers had been told to come to the Centre Social for an instruction session, “How to prepare baby’s first foods.” At the outset, Monsieur Kouacou asked the mothers what they usually fed their babies. One mother, a peasant woman from a

nearby village, answered: “Potatoes and *vermicelles* [angel-hair pasta].” Monsieur Kouacou raised his eyebrows and asked: “That is what you are eating in your village? Potatoes and *vermicelles*?” Another woman stepped in, saying that she fed her baby Blédina, an expensive imported instant baby food, which her husband bought at the pharmacy in Bongouanou. Monsieur Kouacou shook his head in disbelief and spoke in a soft, caring voice. “You should use the same staples that you are eating. When you are pounding *foutou*, take some of the boiled plantains or yams, mash it and give it to the baby! Peanut sauce with leaves, very rich, very nourishing, there’s vitamins, everything is in there to give your baby power and strength and make his bones grow steady and solid. You will see how the tone of his skin will change, how he will shine, because of all the good stuff in your plantain, the leaves you put in your sauce... Why would you give him *vermicelles* and potatoes? You want him to become a *blâfue* [white person]?” he asks with a blink in my direction. “I can tell you, that won’t work. *Mouton ne fait pas cabri* [lit. a sheep does not give birth to a goat].”

This scene demonstrates that “conspicuous consumption” (Veblen, 1912) was an important marker of distinction in the intertwined making of “beautiful babies” and good parents. Feeding one’s child *vermicelles* and potatoes or expensive imported formula was used by mothers to perform their competence vis-à-vis the expert. But the scene also shows that conspicuous consumption always needs an audience (see Campbell, 1995; see also Zhu, 2010; N’Guessan, 2022)—in this case Monsieur Kouacou, the other mothers, and, not least, me, the anthropologist. Interactions between social officers and parents often resembled performances and hence involved some kind of choreographing. And whereas Monsieur Kouacou provided the stage, he was not the director of the performance. The two mothers attempted to present themselves as “knowing” and “competent,” giving answers they believed would be considered “right” in the eyes of the audience. Yet there were limits to the performative power of parenting: (1) because the audience might not “buy” the performance and (2) because the causal effects of good parenting were overrated, as demonstrated in the mocking comment that feeding a baby “white people’s food” would not turn it into a white person.

MOUTON NE FAIT PAS CABRI: ASPIRATIONAL PARENTING AND PARENTAL SELVES

The proverb *Mouton ne fait pas cabri*, “A sheep does not give birth to a goat,” was often used by my Ivorian interlocutors to explain the contingency of parenting. Many middle-class parents placed much emphasis and effort on their children’s future success and showed disapproval if their children failed their aspirational fantasies (see Feldman-Savelsberg, 2020). *Mouton ne fait pas cabri* was the shrugging, sometimes sneering comment with which success or failure in aspirational parenting were explained or brushed aside.

Rita, a single mother of two who worked at the district court, explained that she had initially moved to rural Bongouanou because she did not want her teenage children to be tempted by the city life of Abidjan, where she herself had grown up. Especially her eldest son, 16-year-old Andy, was a constant cause of worry and concern, not least because she knew that he was lacking a strict and caring father to guide his path. Sharing mothers’ worries over a bottle of wine one evening, she complained that even in Bongouanou, Andy surrounded himself with bad company, did not take school seriously, and had acquired bad habits such as smoking and drinking. Rita confessed that at Andy’s age she was also “difficult,” wild, and unrestrained, hanging around, going out with boys, neglecting school, and lying to her mother. When she was 17, her mother threw her out of the house, and she moved in with a relative.

[Andy] has changed from being a sweet, affectionate boy with whom I had a trusting, friendly relationship to a rebellious teenager. [She sighs.] *Mouton ne fait pas cabri*. I only now understand how difficult it must have been for my mother at that time.

Returning to Bongouanou after a few months of absence, I met Rita’s daughter on the street. The cheerful, communicative girl immediately shared the news: they had moved to a neighbor’s house that offered more space and privacy for her, her mother and siblings, and her mother’s sister—and also Andy when he came

to visit on weekends. “Why would he come to visit?” I asked. “Oh, Andy goes to school in Dabou now, and lives with his uncle,” she explained. Later, Rita told me that after the difficult time she had had with Andy and having received advice from a colleague at court working with “delinquent youths,” she had decided that “a firm male hand” and a little distance from her was the best thing for their relationship. So she sent him to a boarding school in Dabou, where her elder brother lived. “You know, when my mother sent me away back then, she gave up on me, but I didn’t give up on Andy. On the contrary, by sending him away, I showed him that, in fact, I did care what became of him.” She added that she had the impression that Andy himself had appreciated the “second chance” and had wholeheartedly embraced schooling. “*Mouton a quand même fait cabri, alors?*” [So the sheep after all *has* given birth to a goat?], I ask with a grin. Rita laughs: “Maybe I grew some sort of horns of my own.”

Rita’s handling of the conflictual relationship with her son is characterized by not only efforts to find professional guidance (the social worker, the uncle) but also a high degree of self-reflexivity. What went wrong, she asked, why was this happening? Where did I take a wrong turn? She had always wanted to be a friend to her children, not just a mother. Her own mother, she explained, was not a friend to her but rather a rival from the moment Rita began to change from girl into a woman, although their relationship in early childhood had been very close and loving. “We no longer talked to each other,” Rita commented, saying that she definitely wanted to handle things differently with her children. She said she had been distressed when she realized her son was distancing himself from her, orienting himself strongly toward peers, no longer listening to her advice, but even worse, no longer demanding it. Now they had grown closer again, and he had understood that she had not “sent him away” in sending him to boarding school, but on the contrary that it was an act of love.

My conversations with Rita about the challenges of raising “difficult” children were among many examples of how parenting among middle-class Ivorian parents is seen as, on the one hand, a strongly agentic practice (what I do has direct, causal consequences for my child) and, on the other hand, competing with a number of non-influenceable factors (genes, peer influence, societal factors such as poverty).

When I asked him how one could tell if someone was a good father, Serge Tanoh, a father of five living in a middle-class quarter of Bongouanou, where he worked as a journalist, told me:

[He] has to guide his children in the right direction. And when your child succeeds, they will say: “Yes, you have had a good father. Your father really has been a good man.” That you yourself are good. Thus, they will say that the child mirrors the image of the father. A good father therefore has to make sure that his child will turn out good. He has to be a model for his child. But he also has to struggle so his children will succeed (Serge Tanoh, Bongouanaou, July 2017).

A good parent is one who makes sure that their child turns out well, by providing a model to copy and by showing interest and engagement in the child’s education. But, as Serge Tanoh further elaborates, it is not necessarily through parenting practice but through reputation that a child will be considered “good”:

It is [... the father’s] good name, which turns his children into good people. Because he is good, he makes good children. [...] When they say “This is the son of Tanoh,” automatically you think “Ah, yes, Tanoh is a good man [...] I see why his son is like that. He is as good and noble as his father.” [...] Consequently, as a father you have the duty to be good, to be a model, because the way you are will be accredited to your children. (Interview, Serge Tanoh, Bongouanou, July 2017)

Parent and child are explicitly understood as mutually constitutive, since not only may the father’s reputation shape the child’s becoming but the child may in turn “support” or “spoil” the reputation of the parent:

And it also means you have a responsibility towards your children. If you don't reach out to your children, you don't follow up on their education, [...] naturally people will [...] judge your child, who has turned out to become a thief, as the product of your failure as a father: "This one has not been a good father. He was bad. Voilà, look at his child. He was bad, voilà his child." This is how people will talk and it will happen very quickly. [...] If the child turns out a thief, they will say: "Certainly his father was a thief, too." That's how it is. So, your image, who you are, is mirrored in the life of your children. (Ibid.)

I was struck by that teleological narrative. How should I make sense of the omnipresent gossip about the prefect's son who was expelled from school or the youngest son of the village chief who was convicted of robbery that was shared at the market, in shared cabs, and when neighbors did laundry together. How can the child of Monsieur Such-and-Such go bad when he himself is considered a "good man" and a "good father"?

The ambiguity inherent in the concept of parental determinism becomes prevalent in these accounts of "failing" to be a good parent and in stories about the "wayward sons or daughters" of a "good family." Having money, leading a morally exemplary life, and being socially recognized does not automatically make a good father: if this "good man" does not also take care of his children, talk to them, teach them what is good or bad behavior, and instead limits himself to paying for a school place and care by a nanny, then he has fulfilled only a part of his fatherly obligation (see also N'Guessan, 2024). To be a good father, it is also necessary to watch over the behavior of one's child and to intervene in a regulating way. The same is true for a mother, who has to be close to her children and watch over their development in order to intervene early when things go wrong. If she fails in that important task, the beauty of her child will not endure, and she herself will not be able to capitalize on her child's beauty for the sake of her own (moral) beauty. Even worse, people will eventually see her as the "sheep" she has always been, though she has attempted to raise a goat. Rita's story may thus be reinterpreted not only as an account of how parents navigate the complex task of being a parent but also as a reflection of the agentic limits of "making good children." Both Rita and Serge may serve as examples of how Ivorian middle-class parents and civil servants successfully merged local concepts of personhood and the links between beauty, morality, and health (apparent in my discussion above of the baby shows) with contemporary ideas about child development and individualistic or neoliberal models of parent-child relationships (for an analysis of the unintended consequences of such links see also Mai & Scheidecker, 2025).

The encounters of policing and measuring parental competence I have described are peculiar neither to Côte d'Ivoire nor to the time of research. The other contributions to this special issue vividly illustrate this. Historically, parenting as a field of biopolitical intervention was part and parcel of colonial administrative practice aimed at "civilizing" colonial subjects.¹³ Recent early child development schemes addressing the supposedly "underdeveloped brains" of children in the global South (Scheidecker et al., 2023) seem to reproduce racist colonial stereotypes about African motherhood (Allman, 1994). Allman shows that as early as the 1920s and 1930s, high infant mortality in the colonies became the object of a civilizing project directed against "ignorant mothers," false expertise (especially traditional midwifery and obstetric practices), and supposedly child-endangering family normativities. Economic and political aspects of the problem of infant mortality (e.g., the change and destruction of traditional family structures through forced labor and labor migration in colonial plantations and mines) were not considered. Instead, it was "motherly competence" that was addressed. Yet in recent years, the idea that parenting is a skill set, a practice, rather than a state of being has grown, and parenting interventions have become more prevalent at all social levels, even if they differ according to whether they address middle- and upper-class parents' aspirational subjectivities through workshops or seminars educating parents to raise "future leaders" (Issahaku, 2019), or poor parents in an effort to "break the cycle" of a "culture of poverty" (Barnes et al., 2006, 18–20).

Both facets of performative parenting are apparent in the Ivorian context. Yet why do experts and parents engage at all with deeply contested normativities of good parenting as promoted by early child development? I suggest that the answer to this question has two aspects. First, early child development

theory allows parents, despite severe conditions, to enact middle-class aspirations of becoming better through a particular kind of parenting. Second, early child development theories correspond with existing ideas about childcare and parenting, at least to some degree, making them easily adaptable for experts and parents. A genealogy of the links between childcare, beauty, and morality in the region helps to unravel these unexpected similarities. In the following Section I analyze how inner and outer beauty, character formation, and parenting are linked and how this intersects with contemporary policy in early child development schemes.

BEAUTY, MORALITY, AND PARENTAL DETERMINISM

Being beautiful on the outside is conceived in many West African societies as illustrative of inner or moral beauty (Gottlieb, 2004: 130–31; Hallen, 2000) and linked to being whole as a person (Feldman-Savelsberg, 1999, 102). Hence, the vigilant skincare, washing routines, and so on that accompany rites of passage such as birth, initiation, or death are means to allow inner beauty to be reflected on the outside (see Boone, 1986). For Côte d'Ivoire, Alma Gottlieb, in her study on Beng infancy, has shown that taking care of a baby's "beauty" (bathing it twice daily; applying powders, lotions, and *keho*; putting strands of jewelry around its wrists, ankles, belly, and neck) is a way to protect the baby from evil and sickness and assure its psychological health and social embeddedness (2004, 107–35)—in short, it's becoming a good person. Since infants are believed to not yet live entirely in the world of the living but to have strong connections to the afterlife and a yearning to return to the place of the ancestors (*wrugbe*), parents have an obligation to lure them into this world by enhancing their beauty (Gottlieb, 2004, 87). A beautiful baby, admired by other potential caregivers, will be less tempted to return to the realm of the dead and the not-yet-born, to its *wrugbe* parents (2004, 239–40). In my fieldwork I observed similar vigorous infant bathing routines and different facets of outer and inner "cleansing" (herbal washes, enemas, vaccines) for medical, social, and spiritual reasons. Going back to the introductory explanation offered by Mme Assouman about why a thorough "cleansing" of the womb was needed before a mother could give birth to a "good" child, beauty and cleanliness, inside and out, parent and child, are considered mutually constitutive.

Among the intriguing insights of classic ethnographic texts on parenting in West Africa are emic concepts of child development that accredit a child's character to "substance" rather than regarding it as shaped by culture. If a child turns out "bad," it is because it has been nursed with the "milk of a bad mother" (Riesman, 1992, 163). Thus, the most important thing a future father has to do is "to find [their] child a good mother," as the title of Riesman's book suggests. One could grasp this as equivalent to "genetics." Assuring their (future) children's beauty and goodness here appears less the result of something parents do (e.g., prenatal care, as in the introductory remarks) and more linked to choices they make prior to conception ("finding a good mother/father") or to the child's character (something that in Côte d'Ivoire would often be explained as "traits" of ancestral heritage, since all children come from the afterlife; Gottlieb, 2004, 89ff.). However, this does not mean that parenting in the sense of care work is dispensable: parents' constant efforts at guidance are crucial in preserving or shaping the beauty of the child (Riesman, 1992, 162f.) and its physical and psychological wellbeing (ibid, 171ff.). Alma Gottlieb describes how, similarly to the rigid child development schemes promoted by the Centre Social and child health reviews, development phases such as teething, crawling, speaking, or walking are riddled with normativities regarding how and in what order these things should happen, and that it is considered a bad omen if they do not. Consequently, women made use of more or less "magical techniques to hasten [or slow down] their children's [...] development" (2004, 223–33).

How do these ethnographic insights on beauty and personhood relate to the recent parenting turn (Lee et al., 2014)? Parenting here appears as a learnable skill, a "complex mixture of decisions, actions, and emotions" (Vincent, 2017, 3), and this in turn implies a moral and societal obligation to acquire parenting skills and techniques when bringing children into the world (see Ramaekers & Suissa, 2012). If parents are made responsible for the future success of their children, this amounts to an idea of education that does not primarily socialize children into a community but rather focuses on distinction—"successful children" can

be positively related to parents' identity, an "achievement" of the parents, who "do not simply live their lives through children but, in part, develop themselves through them" (Faircloth, Hoffman and Layne, 2013, 33; see also Miller, 1997). It is through having a "good" child that the repetitive acts of being a good parent (caring, nurturing, reflecting upon one's parenting) materialize and may be mobilized in the making of parental selves. I have a fat baby? It is because I fed it well. I have a clever child? It is because I took good care of her schooling. My grown daughter takes care of me once I am old and needy? It is because I loved her and took good care of her when she was small.

The major difference between parental determinism in its "Western" neoliberal understanding and traditional philosophies about the parent-child relationship is that one boils down to "doing" and the other to "being." In contemporary Côte d'Ivoire, parents and parenting experts navigate between these two possibilities of understanding and crafting parental care work and subjectivities. As I showed in the preceding sections, parents were aware that they had only limited influence on their children's success, making aspirational projects (in the sense of making a life through one's children) a risky endeavor. One could rephrase a local version of "parental determinism" as a radical understanding of parent-child-relatedness, one that relates not to "doing" but to "being"—your child is good because you yourself have been good. At the same time, this radical notion of interdependency leaves much less room for failure and therefore is also experienced as empowering.

Successful[ly] bringing up [...] a child is not a matter of parental technique—of doing—but of being. If you are a moral person and come from a good family, then your child will have received these qualities at your breast. [...] Once you have raised your child and provided a material start in life and the benefits of your wisdom, you have fulfilled your duty as a parent. Now it is upon your child to decide whether or not to follow the same path you did. [...] It would never occur you to think you failed or made some mistake if the child chose not to do so, for it was not you who made the child in the first place, but God. (Riesman, 1992, 179)

At the end of his book, Riesman raises the question of why Fulani parents are such engaged parents, Fulani mothers dedicating most of their time to the care of infants, if they do not believe that what they do can make any difference, can be "beneficial." In the case of the Fulani, the short answer is something like: because Fulani experience their being in the world as characterized by relatedness and not individual fate. Mothers invest love and care not because they think it might "benefit" their children but because they experience themselves as "one" with their children, a relationship that is to such a degree a source of identity that with the birth of the first child, their name changes to "Mother of so-and-so." In the contemporary Ivorian context, one could conclude that mothers invest love and care as a way of instantiating their inner goodness, notwithstanding the fact that they do not entirely control the efficacy of that care. In other words, it is not so much parental determinism but parental self-performance that we see at work. The goodness inherent in a person is not directly the result of care, but care is the way that goodness is realized. One could rephrase Riesman with reference to the theme of this special issue: mothers invest love and care because parenting is as much about parental selves as it is about raising children.

Parenting experts such as Mme Assouman therefore addressed parents' subjectivities as a means to tackle their fragile legitimacy as experts in a field that seemed, at least to some, more or less needless (after all, parents had raised children for centuries without elaborate advice—why should they be in need of it now?). As a result, not only did experts contest parental competence, but they too had their legitimacy as experts contested. From an anthropological perspective, there is not much difference between a vaccine and enemas and herbal washes: both essentially refer to a similar functionalist logic of parental determinism. But the experts (and the question of how they create legitimacy as experts) and the audiences (in the sense of who looks at these performances and what kind of sense they make of them) differ—and thus they essentially evoke different kinds of classed parental selves.

Positive parenting programs promoted by NGOs and local state structures such as the Centre Social consciously play on the aspirational identities of parents, who hope for a better life for their children and, via them, for themselves. If we transfer the question raised by Riesman to the case discussed here, we might

ask why parents invest love, care, money, and work in their children's upbringing if, ultimately, *mouton ne fait pas cabri*. The answer might be: because performative parenting offers parents an opportunity to craft a life of their own, living "through" their children. Public performances of doing and being good were not only the display of parental determinism but also its means.

CONCLUSION

The metaphor of cleaning the house (in the introductory quote) and the proverb *mouton ne fait pas cabri* are two sides of the same coin: depicting parenting as something that does not just happen naturally but needs investment and care and involves sophisticated knowledge, yet that is limited by the agency of "nature," the child, and the spirits. My paper has demonstrated that raising "good" children requires communal efforts to "be good" and "do good," invoking the subjectivities of both parents and experts alongside their acts of parenting and counseling. Where "being good" refers to the empowering aspects of parental determinism, depicting parents as powerful actors, "doing good" corresponds to an assumed parental incompetence, confirming the idea that parenting is a task too important to be left to parents alone. According to people such as Mme Assouman and Monsieur Saraka, the "beauty" of the baby (or the future success of a child) appears as the direct result of its parents' constant efforts to do good: capable and competent and drawing upon the expertise of caring experts. Also, both invoke an aspirational element to parenting. The idea of cleansing or cultivation was not restricted to hygiene or financial care but was much more encompassing, addressing the morals and subjectivities of parents through care for their child. With the notion "I don't force, but I recommend," in Mme Assouman's utterance cited in the introduction, she ultimately addressed parents' critical self-assessment and aspirational performance. And so did Monsieur Saraka, when he reminded his clients that the success of their offspring would pay out for them. Once their child was a doctor or a lawyer, they would remember to whom they owed their success and pay their parents back. These stances suggest that it is through the choices you make as a parent that you can eventually help your child and, through your child, yourself to become the people you aspire to be. Parenting, therefore, is not only a public performance; it is also performative, in the sense that it brings about a state of being through repetitive acts of doing "good."

The idea that a child is the product of their parents' care, as promoted by experts, and the idea that a child's "beauty" mirrors their parents' moral beauty, as local discourse states, not only coexisted but reinforced one another. Contemporary parental determinism in Côte d'Ivoire, in other words, at once is rooted in well-established local imaginaries of self and personhood and opens spaces for the development of aspirational parental subjectivities. Yet there are also differences between the logics of parental determinism and local concepts of child development. Whereas parental determinism and global early child development schemes assume a particular causal logic that is rather one-directional (top-down, one could also say, with the parent possessing agency and the child the project that is to be developed), the narrative of *mouton ne fait pas cabri* and local concepts of character formation are much more complex and multidirectional. A beautiful baby in turn beautifies the whole family, and a good son can prove his father's goodness. At the same time, people are well aware of the limits of parents' influence through their actions. *Mouton ne fait pas cabri*, therefore, accounts for external or structural influences such as poverty as well as for the agency of the child itself—both factors that tend to be downplayed by parental determinism and early child development schemes. By consenting, rejecting, appropriating, translating, or debating new and old norms of good childcare, experts and parents together participated in the negotiation of the terms and practices of being capable, competent, and caring.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Mme Assouman, like all names in this paper, is a pseudonym.

² Mme Assouman was from Benin but had lived since her early 20s in Abidjan, where she had been married to an Ivorian man. Most of her patients were the daughters of Beninise immigrants, whose mothers had already given birth to them with the assistance of Mme Assouman. Living as second-generation “foreigners” in a country that had in recent years gained a notorious reputation as encouraging rather than fighting xenophobic attitudes, women of Beninise or Nigerian origin rather turned to a kinswoman when it came to seeking expert counseling in issues of childbirth, childcare, and parenting.

³ This is certainly not an exception but rather a (colonial) continuation of midwifery as bio-political intervention in family practices (see Barthélémy 2004).

⁴ Founded in 1988, the Centre Social works under the auspices of the Ministry of Women, Family and Children and in close partnership with NGOs active in the region, such as Save the Children.

⁵ There is a huge body of literature on the (emerging) African middle classes. For an overview see Lentz (2016). In the context of this paper, the performative or aspirational aspects of middle-classing as practice are of particular interest: see, for example, Pauli (2019); Spronk (2014); Chipkin (2012).

⁶ Translation from Agni by Ernest Morokro.

⁷ This genealogy of baby contests as “mothering contests” can be traced back to colonial times (see e.g., Hugon 2020). In the neighboring British colony of Ashanti and Gold Coast, as Jean Allman (1994) has shown, already in the 1920s and 1930s missionaries, nurses, teachers, and female medical officers were entrusted with the making of proper mothers. One of the most successful instruments in this was “baby shows.” In 1925 the senior sanitary officer of Kumasi organized a baby show in the context of a “Health Week.” Overwhelmed by huge interest (as many as 500 babies were brought to be put on display), the following year the administration decided to accept only babies whose names had been entered in the Register of Births, resulting in a threefold increase in the number of births registered.

⁸ Akan groups such as the Baoulé and the Agni, to whom most of my interlocutors belonged, are traditionally matrilineal with virilocal residence patterns (see Weiskel 1978, 529ff.; Boutilier 1969). Whereas young children usually grow up with their mother in the household of their father's kin, they inherit from and belong to their mother's lineage. From the age of seven, boys move in with and learn from their maternal uncles. For the Agni, the first wave of Akan westward migrants who settled just beyond the Comoë river, this is still the case. Baoulé social organization, however, faces different circumstances, due to successive waves of westward migration. Often, Baoulé live in rather dispersed minority settlements among other people; thus, land for cultivation is plentiful but the workforce one can control is scarce. Under these conditions, instead of the traditional Akan matrilineage *abusuan*, the localized household led by a male head, the *aoulo bo* has become the primary form of social organization. The *aoulo bo* are cognatic descent groups with overlapping membership, perpetually competing to some extent for the effective adherence of the same mutually eligible personnel. Baoulé fathers, therefore, had a structural interest in providing their children with their “good name” and binding them to their own household through practices of care and economic “provision,” whereas Agni fathers did not.

⁹ In fact, Allman (1994, 307–308) shows that “school fees” were a central source of conflict between fathers and mothers after missionaries began to disrupt Akan normativities of parenthood.

¹⁰ Perhaps this is because mothers who feared that their babies would not meet the standards of a “beautiful” baby wouldn't come, or at least wouldn't much socialize with other mothers. Yet I remember one occasion where a woman with a severely sick baby came, who was having difficulties in breastfeeding. I did not observe any comparison or judgment but rather solidarity and compassion: one woman caringly took the coughing baby from the mothers' arms and lulled it to sleep, while another empathetically consoled the exhausted mother.

¹¹ I draw here on Heimerdinger's (2013) work on parenting as a field largely obeying routines of competitive comparison.

¹² From what I have observed, this “summoning” took the shape of an invitation, rather than scolding, making mothers feel seen and taken into special care. Even mothers who did not show up at these instruction sessions did not experience any negative

consequences, since Monsieur Kouakou was convinced that public scolding would not help the child. In case of severe, health-endangering neglect or even abuse, however, he would get a more radical machinery of intervention started, usually involving other actors, such as the gendarmerie or local religious authorities.

¹³For an analysis of these unexpected continuities, see Hannaford (2025).

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