Caring and caning – Luo children’s perceptions of respect and reciprocity

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Abstract

The article explores Luo children’s perceptions of the people they like and respect and the ones that they dislike and disrespect. It is shown how the relationships can be characterized by Sahlins’ analytical concepts of generalized and negative reciprocity. The persons that the children like are predominantly parents or age mates and the reasons given emphasize the tangible and intangible gifts and services rendered. The disliked persons are mostly non-kin children and adults. Stealing and beating as well as other perceived injustices are mentioned as main causes. However, caning is perceived not only as a negative action conducted by the disliked persons, but also as an accepted disciplinary sanction. The findings show the basic elements of the moral economy of reciprocity among the Luo children as it is often sanctioned by references to Christian values.

**Keywords:** children, exchange, Kenya, Luo, reciprocity, respect.

Introduction

Studies of children and childhood have gained an important place in anthropology. LeVine (2007) reminds us, that ethnographic studies of childhood are not a recent phenomenon and reviews the many contributions over the past 80 years. The seminal work of James, Jenks, and Prout (1998) highlight children’s roles, not only as passive individuals, but also as active social agents. During the past decades, this has been a key perspective in anthropological and sociological childhood studies, and simultaneously, there has been a marked increase in the number of research projects focusing on childhood in both in industrialized and developing countries. The research, on which the present article is based, has been conceived within this discourse and should be seen as part of a large cluster of anthropological studies of childhood in eastern Africa (e.g. Meinert 2001; Nyambedha 2006; Onyango-Ouma 2000; Prince 2005). The article aims at describing Luo primary school children’s notions of their key social relationships and whom they liked and disliked, respected and disrespected. Based on their explanations of
the main reasons for either, a pattern of the morality of social interaction emerged which was congruent with Sahlin’s (1974) categories of general and negative reciprocity. It was furthermore shown how infliction of physical pain (caning) was not necessarily seen as something negative (but could also be a warranted disciplinary action), and how the perceptions of respect and disrespect was often explicitly sanctioned by the children’s references to Christianity. Thus, the likes and dislikes of the children pointed to the basic dynamics and values of the moral economy of reciprocity in contemporary Luo society.

Study area and population

Nyang’oma, where the study was conducted, is situated at the shores of Lake Victoria in Bondo District in western Kenya. It is a semi-arid area with the long rainy season from February to June. However, the rain fall is unreliable which affects the local subsistence farming of mainly maize and sorghum negatively and this often leads food insecurity. Fishing, small scale gold mining and petty trade are other means of subsistence. The Luo population is traditionally patrilineal and virilocal (Ocholla-Ayayo 1976) and in the study area about half of the homesteads are polygynous. However, the traditional lifestyles are rapidly changing partly due to ‘modernisation’ and partly due to the HIV/AIDS epidemic which is rampant in the area and entails major demographic changes (Nyambedha, Wandibba, and Aagaard-Hansen 2001, 2003a, 2003b). In Nyang’oma, the small township centre from which the division got its name, there is a Roman Catholic mission that at the time of the study supported three primary and one secondary school as well as a dispensary and other institutions. In the Educational Zone of Amoyo (of which the study’s primary school was part) there were a total of 13 primary schools and a total of about 2800 children enrolled.

Methodology

The study is based on data generated in October 1998 by twenty nine school children attending Standard (class) 6 and 7 in a local primary school. They all wrote essays based on two questions: “write about somebody you like or respect and explain why” and “write about somebody you dislike or disrespect and explain why”. Data from the essays were supplemented by participant-observation and general familiarity with the study area for the past 17 years.

The essays were written in the vernacular, Dholuo, and subsequently translated into English by trained field assistants. Subsequently quality control was done by a Dholuo speaking research assistant. The school was purposively selected based on the view that it was typical for most primary schools in the area. All the children in the two classes that were attending school at the given days participated. The children were informed about the project and had the option to decline participation without repercussions. As the research team had worked in the school for three years already, both the Parents-Teachers Association and the school management approved the project activities.
The analysis was conducted from a perspective of social constructivism (Schwandt 1994), where children’s choices of (positive and negative) ‘important others’ and their reasons why were in focus. On that basis, the essays were analyzed for cross-cutting themes and conspicuous patterns and links which are illustrated in the quotes below. In that process, the ‘problem of authencity’ has been fully acknowledged in the sense that “it remains the case that the words and phrases have been chosen by the researcher (.....). The point of view being presented is, therefore, the view of the author, not that of the child” (James 2007, 264-265). Nevertheless, the article claims to provide glimpses into the social relations, likes and dislikes of Luo children in western Kenya, some of which are contextually bound and some of which may have more general relevance beyond this Luo community. In the same vain it is not the concern to judge whether the children’s statements are true, but rather to take them at face value as representations of their social world. Finally, the present article does not engage in judging the rights and wrongs of Luo values and moralities.

In this paper, the children (as well as the ones about whom they are talking) are kept anonymous. When quoting the informants, they are referred to by numbers (6.1 to 6.15 for the ones in Standard 6, and 7.1 to 7.14 for the ones in Standard 7).

**Modes of reciprocity**

Reciprocity as an analytical concept is “one of the few main topics of social science” playing an important role in anthropology, sociology, social psychology and economy (Kolm 2008, 49). Whereas economic authors originally took the stand that reciprocal behavior is based on self-interest, more recent research-based theories contend that “reciprocity is not only a behaviour but also a motive that sometimes appears to be inconsistent with self-interest” (Bruni, Gilli, and Pelligra et al. 2008, 1), and that “reciprocity is a behavioral response to perceived kindness and unkindness, where kindness comprises both distributional fairness as well as fairness intentions” (Falk and Fischbacher 2006, 294). “People do not always react as the strictly self-interested *homo oeconomicus*” (Kolm 2008, 29). Within sociology, Gouldner’s (1960) seminal article contributes to a clarification of the concept and points out the close relation to functionalism. Marcel Mauss’s classic, The Gift (1980), is a milestone in the social scientific quest to comprehend exchange and reciprocity. He states that “reciprocity is the human rock on which societies are built” (Kolm 2008, v).

Later Sahlins (1974) elaborated and suggested a ‘scheme of reciprocities’ comprising a continuum from generalized over balanced to negative reciprocity. Generalized reciprocity “refers to transactions that are putatively altruistic, transactions on the line of assistance given and, if possible and necessary, assistance returned” (Sahlins 1974, 193-194). Balanced reciprocity “refers to direct exchange. In precise balance, the reciprocation is the customary equivalent of the thing received and is without delay” (Sahlins 1974, 194). Negative reciprocity “is the attempt to get something for nothing with impunity.” (Sahlins 1974, 195).22 Though Sahlins’ perspective is to a large extent economic and comprises exchange of commodities, this classification is also of relevance to the present article as it will be shown below.
Luo children’s views of ‘positive and negative relationships’

A total of 29 children accepted to write the essays. There were 15 boys and 14 girls, out of whom 15 in Standard 6 and 14 in Standard 7. The age range in Standard 6 was between 11 years, 10 months and 16 years, 7 months, and in Standard 7 between 13 years 10 months and 17 years, 6 months. The broad age range in both classes is a common phenomenon in this part of the world due to variation in age at school start as well as frequent repetitions. Because of the age overlap, the differences between the two Standards were not emphasized in the analysis.

**Liking and respecting**

When choosing a person that they liked or respected, the majority of the pupils (20/29) mentioned close kin. In most cases (10) it was ‘parents’, sometimes combined with either ‘grandparents’, ‘teacher’ or even ‘elders and uncle’ - or equivalently mothers (5) or fathers (4). In one case the ‘grandmother’ was mentioned. In the remaining cases (9/29) the children named specific persons that were not kin (see Table 1).

*Table 1.* Categories of the people mentioned by the children as being either liked or respected, or disliked or disrespected.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Like/respect</th>
<th>Dislike/disrespect</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Kin</strong></td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents:</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents &amp; grandparents:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents &amp; elders &amp; uncle:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents &amp; teacher:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother:</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father:</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandmother:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Non-kin</strong></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific persons named</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>“Neutral”</strong></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thieves:</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others:</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>29</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The children gave many and to a large extent similar reasons for liking and respecting their parents (mothers and/or fathers). Some recognized that they were their ‘creators’:

Mother is a very good person. I respect her (omiye luor) so much because she is the one who carried me in her womb until she gave birth to me, and she is the one who took care of me (….). (7.5, girl, 13 years)

The majority mentioned that the parents were the providers of tangible things such as food, housing, soap, shoes and clothing as well as other essentials like provision of medical care and schooling. In more general terms it was recognized that parents make an effort to support the child: “I also like them (ahero gi) because they work hard, so that I get clothes and shoes.” (6.3, girl, 12 years). Also the concern and protection provided by the parents is appreciated:

She [the mother] has taken care of me (orita koa) from childhood up to now, so that I know how to distinguish between bad and good. And even when I was sick she took care of me well. And even the way children get burnt, she took care of me and I never got burnt. (7.11, girl, 16 years)

In this rural community, where death is common, other issues are appreciated as well: “I like (ahero) the parents because even now in case I die, then it’s him/her who would look for a coffin before anybody else begins.” (6.12, girl, 13 years)

In the cases above, the pupils mentioned rendition of very tangible commodities and the direction was mainly unidirectional (from parents to children) as is comprised by the concept of general reciprocity. However, also more intangible services were mentioned, such as the role of parents as ‘teachers’: “(…) he/she teaches me (opuonja) many jobs. Now I know how to wash utensils, clothes, how to fetch firewood (…)”. (6.11, girl, 15 years). This reflects the phenomenon that children carry out all sorts of domestic and agricultural tasks in this rural community. In addition to teaching, the parents also played the role as controllers of discipline:

(…) I also love (ahero) my parents because they teach me (gipuonja) to know wrong and right. And more so when I did something wrong, they caned me (gichwada) when I was still young, and I thought they did not like me (ok dwara) and hated me (ochaya). Nowadays I have realized that they were teaching me (gipuonja) (….). I nowadays just smile knowing that they used to teach me so well (….). (7.10, boy, 14 years)

Finally, the children simply expressed that they liked each other: “(…) and I like (ahero) my parents because they too like me (gihera).” (6.3, girl, 12 years)

The impression that most of the quotes above are from girls is a true reflection of the data where the girls dominated in this part. The quotes above may give the impression that parents were always perceived positively. However, that was not the case. Especially when either the mother or the father were explicitly mentioned (9 cases), it was often an indication that the other was less liked. This could be expressed in different willingness to assist:
Dad, even when I tell him to buy me sandals to go with to school, he just tells me that he does not have [money]. And if I tell Mum, she buys [the sandals for] me. So for that, I like (ahero) Mum more than Dad. (7.11, girl, 16 years)

The last quote refers to the frequent situation where pupils are sent home from school to collect money for various things. Some children narrated how the difference was expressed in situations when they were ill. A boy told this story about when he broke a leg in school:

(...) then my father came and then the teachers collected me and took me to Bondo [the local hospital] and I was treated. And we stayed with him while he took care of me. I stayed in the ward for one week. (...) The next day we went back home. My mother did not do anything for me at all. She could only prepare porridge for me. As from that day I knew that my father is better than my mother. (6.9, boy, 14 years)

In seven of the nine cases where either mother or father was mentioned, they explicitly criticized the other party. Even the child that mentioned the grandmother did so at the expense of the deceased mother. Mothers and fathers were praised in about the same number of cases. In the cases where one parent was preferred to the other it was precisely because the children felt that the discarded one did not live up to his or her obligations to provide tangible and intangible services. Or in the terminology of Sahlin's, they did not live up to the spirit of general reciprocity.

In nine cases specific persons were mentioned that were not relatives and six of these were children:

One day I went with him to poach in the bush. Then we killed only a hare. Then I told him that we did not have any food at all [at home]. Then he told me that I just take the whole hare, because they had some fish in their house (...). (7.3, boy, 16 years)

Thus, the pupils described relationships that were characterized by mutually sharing and helping one another. The help was extended in both directions: "(...) when she has money she can buy me porridge and I take. And even if I am the one who has money, I can buy for her too." (7.8, girl, 16 years)

Also here the pupils describe close friendships characterized by unconditional sharing as can be seen in general reciprocity. Only in one of the six cases, a friend of the opposite sex was mentioned. The children also valued the moral integrity of their friends:

She is still a friend of mine because she pays a lot of deference (ingi luor ahinya) [to others], and she likes to greet the people she meets on the way (...). (7.8, girl, 16 years)

In the three cases where the children named adult non-relatives, there were similar stories of rendering mutual services, though here the relationships were asymmetrical in the
sense that the adults tended to provide more support than the children. The fact that the majority of the children chose a relative as the liked person is in harmony with Sahlins’s observation: “Reciprocity is inclined towards the generalized pole by close kinship, toward the negative extreme in proportion to kinship distance” (Sahlins 1974, 196), though there could be exceptions.

Dislike and disrespect

Only in one case did a child mention a relative as a disliked or disrespected person (see Table 1). A girl (6.10, 15 years) stated that she disliked the ‘father’s sister’. She explained that the father’s sister did not bother or greet people, nor did she pay debt or speak the truth. In all the other cases, the pupils either mentioned specific persons that were not relatives (21/29) or a neutral, general category of persons (7/29) toward whom they had negative feelings.

When asked to explain why they disliked or disrespected certain persons, the two overwhelmingly predominant complaints were ‘stealing’ and ‘beating’. In 13 out of the 21 disliked non-kin cases where named individuals were referred to, stealing was mentioned as a reason for dislike or disrespect. The same was the case in 6 out of 7 of the neutral cases (maybe not so surprising as 5 out of 7 were the called ‘thieves’ – a category that was solely referred to by girls).

What causes hatred (kelo charuok) between me and him is that he stole (no kwalo) a certain book belonging to my sibling. When he was told to return it, he did not want to. He did not want to admit that he had stolen that book. He wanted to beat me (goya), and that is why I don’t like (ok adwar) him. (7.9, boy, 16 years)

Thus, these persons were disliked and disrespected for their stealing – an act that clearly qualifies to be termed negative reciprocity. Beating (or caning, slapping, slashing with panga or fighting) was mentioned in 15 out of 21 named cases and 3 out of 7 of the ‘neutral’ cases: “(...) he knocked me (otuoma) hard and I fell down, and my dress opened and my nose also bled (...)”. (7.4, girl, 17 years)

The children telling about the category ‘thieves’ often mentioned that they were prone to be violent as well: “(...) then he knows that you are a wealthy person, and he can even slap you with a panga (padi kata gi opanga) (...)”. (6.3, girl, 12 years)

Many other (and partly overlapping) reasons for dislike and disrespect were mentioned more rarely. In 4 out of 5 cases where the children mentioned the category ‘thieves’ they were also seen to kill people. Two cases involved accusations of witchcraft, for example:

(...) we annoyed him and he went to the magician who told him [the names of] those who were in that bush [collecting firewood without permission]. So he went for magic and was shown the magic which he placed, and as we were four girls, all of us fell sick, and one died by the name xxx. (7.14, girl, 16 years)
In three cases the disliked persons were seen to hurt animals:

I disrespect (achaye) him because he is someone who likes chasing people and he can cane somebody’s child (....) and he does not want people to graze their cattle near his garden, and that can make him slash (miye otong’) someone’s animals or hit it (ago gi) with something hard. And he can beat an animal like a goat or a sheep and even kill [it] (...). (7.13, boys, 16 years)

Only one child complained that the disliked (named) person lied, whereas in five cases, general statements were made about their personality, for example: “Furthermore, his characters are not good, and I don’t pay deference to him (ok luore) at all (…)”. (7.9, boy, 16 years)

Sometimes, the disliked persons were said to be “untidy like a sheep” or to smell “(...) like a dog which is dead” (7.12, boy, 16 years). Other children complained that the disliked or disrespected persons abused, tempted, disturbed, made noise, bullied, cheated, hurt, disrespected or had bad habits. In one special case, the child disliked and disrespected ‘the inheritor’. The background is that the patrilineal Luo have a tradition of levirate, i.e. that a widow should be ‘inherited’ by another man – ideally a brother of the deceased husband, but in reality many other men may qualify. This is done in order to avoid ritual pollution (kwer) that may lead to illness and death (chira).

(...) there is someone whom I don’t want. He is the inheritor. He inherited our home. Now he wants that I call him ‘father’, but I refused. He held me and caned me, and I ran to my grandmother’s house. (6-9, boy, 14 years)

Then, the child narrated a long story about how the inheritor also stole and was subsequently chased out by the grandmother. Thus, even this case was characterized by negative reciprocity.

Among the 21 named, disliked individuals, the majority were children or youth (13/21), whereas 6 out of 21 were adults. In two cases both categories were mentioned. Only in two of all the cases the disliked persons were females.

Caring and caning – reciprocity in the lives of Luo children

In the essays which were written by the pupils in the vernacular, Dholuo, some key words occurred very frequently. The verbs indicating positive feelings were hero and dwaro (to like, to love). The noun, luoor (respect, fear, deference) is often used in the expression miyo luoor (to give respect), and it was also used as a verb, luoro (to fear, to pay deference to). It is remarkable how these terms merge elements of respect and fear. The reasons why the selected persons were liked or respected stemmed from their good deeds: puonjo (to teach), konyo (to help) or rito (to attend, to take care of).

The opposite situation was expressed either by a simple negation ok (not) in front of the verbs above, for example ok luoro (not to respect), or by the term chayo (to disrespect). The
negative sentiments were explained by a number of verbs conveying negative actions: *chando* (to harass, to molest, to disturb), *goyo* (to beat, to hit), *kwalo* (to steal), *mayo* (to snatch), *miyo otong’o* (to slash), *nyało* (to revenge, to rob), *pado* (to slap), *thago* (to bully, to knock), *otuomo* (to knock), *pado kata gi opanga* (to slap with a panga), *timo marach* (to do wrong), *thago gi wach* (to disturb), *tong’o di beti* (to slash with a panga), *yago* (to tease) or *yanyo* (to abuse, to insult). The verb *chwado* (to cane) was more ambiguous in the sense that caning could be part of relationships that were both positive and negative.

Thus, whereas beating was an important reason for dislike and disrespect, infliction of physical pain was not always perceived to be totally negative. Caning was a process where a stick was used to beat another person - typically a child. In many cases caning was used as a disciplinary practice, and it was frequently observed in homesteads and primary schools in the study area. As it can be seen, some children found it warranted:

> And if you do wrong (*itimó marach*), then you will be caned (*chwadi*), because you are being straightened, so that you dislike (*kik iher*) jokes [having a negative connotation of playing around]. (6.2, girl, 14 years)

Thus, for some of the children caning could be comprised within a relationship of general reciprocity. The cases (7.10, boy, 14 years) and (7.11, girl, 16 years) quoted above are other examples, where parents’ and teachers’ caning was perceived by the children as a legitimate means of disciplining. This ambiguity of caning is in harmony with the observation of Bruni et al. (2008, 4) that “the role of *intentions* is particularly important in Rabin’s work and in the literature on reciprocity in general.” Caning was also frequently used by the local authorities as an accepted sanction, as it was described by the children when the disliked/disrespected people were punished.

> And when the owner of the garden caught him, he was taken to the chief and was caned, then taken to Bondo and again he was caned and jailed (...). (6.2, girl, 14 years)

> Caning as punishment for stealing was also mentioned in the quote of 7.11 (girl, 16 years) above. Caning could also be used as revenge by one child toward another: “I caned him five strokes of cane. From that day he has not teased me again up to today (...).” (6.7, boy, 11 years)
Table 2. Overview of tangible and intangible ‘elements’ of exchange in the relationships as part of the categories of general and negative reciprocity (Sahlins, 1974).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elements exchanged</th>
<th>Tangibles</th>
<th>Intangibles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reciprocity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>General</strong></td>
<td>Providing food, shelter, clothing, gifts.</td>
<td>Caring, helping, supporting, protecting, doing favors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Providing (funding for) schooling and medical care.</td>
<td>Paying respect, obeying and helping parents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Assisting with manual work and school home work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Caring during sickness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Caning as warranted disciplinary action.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Negative</strong></td>
<td>Stealing</td>
<td>Beating and caning as unwarranted action.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Abusing.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to Kolm (2008, 53) “a gift from an agent to another can consist of anything done by the former and favourable to the latter or favoured by her (……) and can be, for instance, bestowing a gift in the strict sense or a favour, approving or expressing a favourable judgment (……) and so on.” Table 2 provides a summary of the various tangibles (commodities) and intangibles (services and favors) that were exchanged within the relationships categorized according to Sahlins’ general and negative reciprocity.

As it appears above, infliction of physical pain in various forms was a prominent part of the children’s lives within the homesteads, in schools and in the community. Articles from Kenyan newspapers showed that it was not just a local phenomenon. For example, The Daily Nation reported on July 20, 1996 about a girl in Kiambu district who died as a direct consequence of caning in her primary school. It is important to emphasize that legislative measures have been taken in Kenya, that the situation varies from place to place (for instance urban or rural areas) and that this is not only a Kenyan phenomenon. The African Charter of the Rights and Welfare of the Child (Organization of African Unity 1999) states that “State Parties to the present Charter shall take specific legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of torture, inhumane or degrading treatment and especially physical or mental injury or abuse, neglect or maltreatment including sexual abuse, while in the care of the child.” (Article 16.1). The ethical dilemmas of universal versus cultural relativistic perspectives on child rights have been aptly described by Nieuwenhuys (2008).
The moral economy of reciprocity

Quite a few of the children themselves had reflections about reciprocity, all of which related to the ‘positive’ cases where they liked or respected someone:

(...) that person who gives you something (miyi gimoro) is the one you too give (emi miyo), and is the one you like (be kendo emi hero). That person who does not give you (ok miyi) something, abuses you (oyanyi) and beats you (ogoyi), you would not like (ok diher). (7.9, boy, 16 years)

This is in line with Gouldner (1960, 171) who suggests “that a norm of reciprocity, in its universal form, makes two interrelated, minimal demands: (1) people should help those who have helped them, and (2) people should not injure those who have helped them”. Furthermore, Gouldner perceives reciprocity as “one among a number of “Principal Components” universally present in moral codes.” Five children (all girls) extended the reciprocity into the future, where they expected to pay back their ‘debt’ to their parents:

I like (ahero) my parents because they are the people who teach me some jobs, so that even when they are sick then I can assist them (konyigi) with such jobs. (6.14, girl, 11 years)

Also here general reciprocity is in focus though in another time perspective. In the terminology of Kolm (2008, 46) this is called ‘intergenerational reciprocities’ or ‘chain reciprocities’. When writing their essays, the children often referred to Christianity (either God, Jesus or the Bible) when explaining the ties to their parents: “Even the Bible says, respect (miya luor) your mother and father plus all people who are older than you (...)” (6.11, girl, 15 years)

This and other quotes expressed principles of general reciprocity with reference to religiously sanctioned morale. However, Christianity could also be used to explain the bad standing of disliked or disrespected persons:

(...) I disrespect (achayo) a thief because they treat us badly, because they steal their fellow’s good properties, and God says ‘don’t covet the thing which belong to your fellow’ (...). (6.11, girl, 15 years)

According to the children, these persons should not only face punishment. Religion would even come in when the children tried to deal with the disliked or disrespected people in a more positive way. A child who stayed with his fervently religious grandparents, told how he pacified the disliked boy: “(...) when he realized that I was beginning to sing to him. And he began to tell me that now we start praying to God. (...) we went to church only twice (...)” (6.6, boy, 15 years)

There were more girls (18) than boys (9) referring to Christianity as a way of legitimizing their positions, both for positive and negative cases. Christianity played a major role in the children’s community. Many people attended church services every Sunday and prayers were often said at the start of meetings and visits before the formal greetings and conversations were initiated. The two dominant denominations were Roman Catholic and Anglican, but there were many minor sects as well.
Conclusion

The article has explored Luo children’s notions of likes and dislikes, respect and disrespect as they were expressed in their relationships to other persons. It has been shown how positive relationships are characterized by free and unconditional exchange of tangible as well as intangible commodities and favors (general reciprocity), whereas the relationships to disliked and disrespected persons were based on negative interactions such as stealing and beating (negative reciprocity). The study showed that infliction of physical pain (e.g. caning) was ambiguous in the sense that it pertained to the positive as well as the negative relationships. In a broader perspective the children’s accounts showed that reciprocity was a cornerstone in the local moral economy.

The study can be criticized from various perspectives. The data collection was based on a combination of long-term participant-observation and essays written in a class room where the school children were sitting close. Thus, in principle there was a chance that the responses (and especially choice of categories) were not completely independent. However, even if it was the case that they had sought ‘inspiration’ from one another, there was no chance that the approximately 40 pages that they wrote in average could be copied. Furthermore, careful reading of the essays showed so much variation in the individual stories and life situations, that this should not be a concern. As always there is the risk that the informants report what the researchers want to hear. However, the fact that the assignments were very open-ended promoted a situation where the children had to mobilize their own perceptions, experiences and values without guidance from the researchers about the direction to take. All the children gave exact dates of birth. However, based on previous studies in the same area, precise age estimates are always dubious. The school enrolment rate in the study areas is estimated to be 80-90%, so the pupils can be claimed to be rather typical for their age group.

The article has described reciprocity as a key concept in the lived experiences and moral worlds of Luo children in western Kenya. Empirically it provided insights into Luo ethnography as well as the anthropology of Luo childhood. Theoretically it emphasized that the vintage concept of reciprocity is still relevant and holds significant explanatory power in contemporary anthropology.

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22. According to Kolm (2008: 13) the term ‘reciprocity’ is mostly used to refer to the positive aspects, whereas the term ‘reciprocation’ more broadly include negative exchanges as well.

23. During the time of the study parents had to pay school fees (about USD 11 per year depending on class level), in addition there were numerous expenses for school uniform, exercise books, text books and many other things. As from 2003 the newly elected Kibaki government introduced free primary education, which reduced the cost significantly, though there were still expenses for items such as school uniforms, pens and exercise books.

References


