Surveying Epistemology: Discursive Impacts on the African Understanding of Childhood Stories

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Abstract:

In this paper, I argue that the evolutionary processes that Africa has been going through translate into the worsening childhood conditions the continent is presently experiencing. By surveying literature on children before, during and after colonization of the continent, it becomes a necessity to further conclude that of the remnants of colonial discourses, 'othering' ourselves remains pervasive to the extent that we disown our children from the way we talk to the way we act. In its totality, this leads to incompetent and malfunctioning plans and policies designed to address the worsening children's conditions in contemporary Africa.

Introduction

For history enlightens us, Orwell writes *"'Who controls the past,' […] 'controls the future: who controls the present controls the past.' And yet the past, though of its nature alterable, never had been altered"*.[1] In fact, history not only helps us understand the present and future, and thereby plan effectively towards achieving goals, but also opens up the possibilities to even revert to some past experiences if possible and when necessary. A policymakers' reflection into where things might have begun and their gradual worsening, or rather any developments thereof, becomes a call of necessity. Referring back to history does absolutely help us resolve some ambivalence regarding social problems we are experiencing today.

Relating it to theory and implementation of various policies designed to avert it, this essay discursively revisits the problem of *street children* (for lack of a better word) in contemporary Africa by looking at the present conceptualizations in relation to the past. As numerous ethnographies suggest, I support the claim that pre-colonial African childhood experiences were far better compared to colonial and post-colonial periods.[2] The paper advances the claim that with time and changing socio-demographic conditions, African childhood experiences became deplorable. I gradually transition from the past, through the *dated* foreign imposition of the African continent and I lastly investigate the various childhood experiences in independent Africa. Before going too far, we need to note at least one point regarding the position the paper takes: childhood conditions and experiences in

general have worsened in Africa, especially beginning the 1990s when massive budget cuts on social spending became a policy until present,[3] and has left a majority of parents and children quite helpless.

We better focus our attention on how the different childhood discourses have evolved. To begin with, the work examines the appropriateness and impact of such definitional terms as *street children,* which are currently in use. I will engage in the rich anthropological discussions of how different African societies under different systems cared for their young ones. This is in order to build the idea that most African societies raised their children better than during colonial domination and after independence. Despite the fact that formal colonialism lasted for less than a century, the abrupt social change it brought has resulted in some long lasting detriments that affect the continent until present. I will then analyze these impacts and relate them to the current situation in order to get a nuanced picture of how these experiences are connected and affect whichever social outcomes we are battling today.

"Street Children" Conceptualized

In late decades, different people – both expert and lay alike – have been trying to understand the concept of childhood in many varied but still connected ways. This struggle occurs amidst their quest to find solutions to the aforementioned growing world-wide problem. Despite the good intentions that I believe we all have, this difficulty in *wording* affects the ways stakeholders design interventions to avert this derailing matter of human concern. It is a shame for humans to abandon their fellow human beings; but despite the noise made so far, there must be people in some uneasily identifiable spaces saying '*who cares'* and after all '*everyone on his own'*! This brings us to at least one important question: can children depend on themselves? Let us note that, humans are known for their long-term dependency compared to other mammals.

As humans we consciously or otherwise make mistakes, and admitting these mistakes is humane. I call the above term, the widely used one, a *mistake* based on common sense. Let us ask ourselves a few questions: Do streets bear children?[4] How so? We obviously have answers to these simple questions, and the answer is NO! But surprisingly, we do still stick to this wrongful construction by holding up to that syntactic qualification without picturing the broad implications such framing could cause. In short and as is discussed in subsequent sections, doing so does in fact detach people, communities and governments from the problem that we claim we are determined to solve. What a controversy! In an increasingly competitive world where even governments have come to focus more on protecting and promoting trade and accordingly reducing budgets on social spending, these conceptual difficulties would adversely affect policy making and implementation of programs aimed at averting the problem of difficult childhood. If we do not have the responsibility and ownership of the *street children* problem, we would consequently lack the urge to judiciously deal with it.

Throughout human civilization, however, all communities have participated in the production and reproduction of these social relations through our socio-economic systems. The way we talk affects the way we do things, and the vice-versa is true. This very principle applies to the way we talk and deal with the problem of children living under difficult conditions from family, to community, society, national and even to international levels. It makes the society not have full responsibility over the matter. And although childhood issues are seemingly a world concern, the situation in developing world is quite worrisome. Children there face double oppression from their own complex systems and from companies flocking into the developing world in search of cheap labor; a problem partly attributed to disharmony of labor standards across nations.[5] Due to states' desire for increased investment, Miller and Levy allege that "*Most extreme forms of child labor are perpetrated by private actors with the acquiescence of public officials…*"[6]

Though with some obscurity, we see the impact of the above analogy occurring at the broad implementation level. For example, despite the fact that most recent development reports show peripheral countries' progress towards bettering their provision of health and educational services to their children, there are a multitude others that are not even half-way the extent reached by their fellows.[7] Reading the accounts carefully one would surmise that the situation in Africa, for example, is still worse than what the reports present. The language of the publications seems to appease the victim countries after decades of continuously accusing them of not performing well in child-related matters.[8] Along these lines, it becomes logical to claim that even some reputable international organizations could also be missing the point. They seem to escape the reality: They avoid things like the ever-growing wealth gap between parents and how it affects children's access to crucial services like health and education, in that regard. Moreover, the warnings they usually give are not critical enough while the picture of efforts they have been painting of African governments' in promoting child health is quite overstated. They emphasize on the role of private investment and increased primary school enrolments, for instance, but they barely say where the children go to after completing primary school at a tender age. The agencies also overlook the fact that private investment's contribution to social projects is a small fraction meant to win social support for the investment cause.

Discursively, it then follows that if we call them *street children* and disown them, then who will be responsible for them? The deficiencies I have discussed above lead to self-alienation of individuals and the society at both national and international levels. The tendency cripples both policy making and implementation, now that we regard ourselves not being part of the problem but are keen to solve it. Quite a controversy!

African Childhood Stories through Present

Perhaps the issues regarding difficult childhood and the problems we are experiencing today existed previously in some rather different ways. No society would remain dormant anyway, but a community's organic development and its determination of its own fate

would make it evolve organically and in a situation more beneficial to and manageable by the domestic population. We need, then, to recall our past and its impact on the present conditions. This subsection presents three broad overviews of childhood experiences before, during and after the advent of colonial domination and the possible causal link between them.

1. Experiencing pre-colonial childhood in Africa

Because children do not depend on their own and form an indisputably the core of any society, we are urged to understand the larger framework under which they were housed in pre-colonial Africa. At least one thing stands out in studying pre-colonial African societies: matrilineal tendencies maintain presence in most parts of the continent.[9] Not all communities retained this attribute, but most societies did. We are informed of the still-enduring Asante matrilineal tendency in present-day Ghana; we are moreover informed of the same tendencies in most parts of Southern and Eastern Tanzania.[10] In fact, even the groupings that favored patrilineal cultures still placed a higher role on mothers in raising children and caring for their homes. Although things have changed over time, this tradition continues today.

On the material basis, matrilineal system guaranteed children of their protection from hunger and other forms of material insecurity for *"relatives on another family were a key resource during times of difficulty…"*[11] All this contributed to better upbringing despite the high mortality rates that could have existed prior to the societies' access to modern technology, but life expectancy at birth was similar to that in developing countries.[12] Whenever fathers of the children were unable to provide for their families, the mother's side came in to their rescue. Even after marrying, women themselves secured more protection through the sustained closeness to their families. A woman could *run* to her brothers and other siblings whenever there were any signs of danger or acts of maltreatment from the husband. In this respect, we can explain the matrilineal tendencies as a survival strategy to mitigate any potential dangers that children could face. The societies emphasized mainly on social values than economic ones.[13] This obligation went through to touch even on issues of inheritance: children were entitled to their mother's lineage and inherit property from that line. In all, in most societies African women assumed a higher role in the past than in present times,[14] and this guaranteed them of their own welfare and translated into the welfare of their children.

Because of the situation explained above, not surprising that some societies did not have words to describe situations like *orphans* and, not to mention *street children.* Ethnography of the various African societies reveals, for example, that most communities used to offer guardianship to children who had lost their parents.[15] Such cases of one losing his or her parent(s) were quite few in number, and the community took a collective responsibility over the children in question. The people there regarded children as a

community property and were to be cared for by the entire society, let alone their close relatives in the event that the children lose their parents.

In Islamic West Africa where religious domestication had completed its round and Islam became an integral part of the people's culture there,[16] things also proved way better than they are today. Islam itself and the cultural-religious mix characteristic of the region, worked to the advantage of children and their mothers. Islam is known from its doctrine for elevating women and protecting them and children alike;[17] though at whims, human deeds could go contrary to the religious teachings. For those who have been exposed to and consequently know the *Holy Quran* they would definitely affirm that Islam requires its followers to provide children with security, guidance and maximum care possible. In other words, Islam considers children as spotless beings whose grooming could determine who they would become in the future. The way we raise our children today determines their fate tomorrow.

The child-friendly situation explained above changed abruptly following a sudden-but-steady shift which put most of these societies in the hands of foreign domination. Since people's autonomy became no more, their traditions were seriously injured, now that they are no longer free to live the way they used to when freedom was in their hands.

2. The colonial transformations

Colonialism should, of course, be regarded as a damaging experience which altered peoples' ways of living wherever and whenever it occurred. With the advent of foreign occupation, *natives* had to work for somebody else rather than for themselves and for the welfare of their society. From colonial occupation to the introduction and implementation of its economic policies, the *locals* suffered the most and benefitted nothing. Imperial tendencies of the colonizing powers treated the *colonized* as *extras*.[18] Incidents of hunger, colonial wars, forced labor, forced taxation and labor migration ravaged the entire continent from east to west, and north to south. Women and children were part and parcel of all these sufferings. In fact, the sad experience greatly emanating from this transformation continues even after independence: it has nearly become an everyday experience from academia to the least complicated endeavors.[19]

Stories of colonial brutality directed toward children are widely documented. During the infamous Tanganyika's Maji Maji War of resisting the German colonial occupation in 1905-1907, for instance, pregnant women had their stomachs ripped open as part of the colonizer's war strategy.[20] Also, In labor migrant regions and colonies most families were left without men as all men were taken to work in mines and agricultural plantations at distant places not to know when they would return home, if that was to happen at all. Most of the migrant laborers died or were alienated for good from their land and people. Botswana serves as the best example for this type of human suffering in which most of its men went to work in South African goldmines.

The infliction of hunger, public hangings and wars against the colonized were also commonplace. Hearing a story on how German colonial officials and their native allies treated children and women during the Maji Maji war, one would wonder how such things could happen, and most importantly could be committed by people on an *evangelizing mission*. As a deterrence not to rebel against the imposed administration, the German colonizers forced children to occupy the front row during public hangings of the people who fought against the colonial power during the infamous Maji Maji anti-colonial war of 1905-1907 in German colonial Tanganyika.[21] As if it was not enough, the colonial wars of occupation employed horrible methods such as burning of native people's food crops and harvests as a winning strategy. It was all misery from sunrise to sunset, and the whole night. There is no way one can explain this experience as better or civilizing.

However, the above situation was not the end. Taxation, forced cultivation of crops and the general monetization of African economies in their totality – in a way alien to the colonized subjects – also damaged the pre-existing African social relations, including children's welfare of course, though most historical accounts happen to overlook this. In order to establish absolute control, this destruction aimed primarily at clearing of African economies and their general ways of living, and thereafter establishing alien sociopolitical structures be them culturally European or the ones the colonizer favored most.[22] But it is usually forgotten that those structures are composed of people and are instituted to cater for the needs of the people, including children. Mothers could not stay at home to look after their children; children were thus denied of their right to parental care and guidance. It is worth noting that most African societies by then had their own ways to educate themselves, especially by passing on parental experiences to children.[23] So, the colonial system also denied African children of their right to education. However less is spoken about this – a socio-historical gap we would rather call to scholarly attention.

This inhuman experience that the society and children had experienced during colonialism translated into who they were to become after attaining independence.[24] After all, even the independence we are jovial about was determined by the colonial powers and administrators themselves; and these now-grown embattled children had to continue following orders. This later claim applies mostly to countries like Ghana, Tanganyika and the like which received independence almost 'peacefully'.[25] Since then, colonial subjects, especially Africans, have always been treated like perpetual teenagers by indirectly being given orders from the former colonizer and its allies for them to follow. Until today, the relationship between the *former colonizer* and the *former colonized* was and still is like a thief sympathizing with the victim he or she has stolen an item from. It all derives from this crippled childhood experience and its everlasting mental impact that we tend to ignore; deliberately overlooking them and now suffering the never-ending irreparable damages.

3. **Childhood in independent Africa**

The abrupt but systematic shift from the peoples' original ways of life and thinking to the colonial one that dominates until present has resulted into detriments which are here to stay.[26] This analogy remains true despite the widespread claims that colonialism is not to blame for everything happening in Africa today.[27] Of course, Africans have their own share in the problems, but the corrupt-mindedness, the dependency syndrome and many other problems we are facing today do largely emanate from this over-half-a-century experience of foreign domination. It produces children already condemned to poverty due to the situation in which they were conceived and will be living in.

In fact, in most African countries the plight of *street children* increases year after another. While the problem escalates, the policies and implementation regress. There is a sharp mismatch between the two. It seems to be the case that less is done at the grassroots level, or that governments are overwhelmed by budgetary constraints and high fertility rates. Consequently, the number of school-aged children currently in school has been diminishing significantly. Despite doubling net enrollment of school-age children in public schools for example, Uganda's 1997 Universal Primary Education (UPE) Program, initially prescribed that only four children from one family could enroll at once. After six years of implementation, the policy changed and allowed all children of school age to enroll in school despite the number of such children a family could register.[28]

As a result, this situation leads to a few interventionist policies to address the situation. Despite the inadequate number of such strategies, most policies – like those claiming to provide free education – happen to be short-lived, fail to deliver empirically, and due to many hidden charges they result in high rates of school dropouts. On the Uganda case again, Bashaasha, Magheni and Nkoya report a 55% school dropout rates,[29] for instance. Had there been the commitment to honest dealings in regard to children's welfare at all levels, contemporary Africa would not be in its current mess.

Saying that nothing is being done will be not only damaging, but also unfair; but most of it is not done in the right way. Most of the intervention techniques are not well thought of: it has become to be the case that governmental agencies and non-governmental organizations pay more attention to donors than to local conditions.[30] They preach the importance of using participatory approaches in social and development endeavors and assessing the needs of a particular community but they themselves do things differently. This mismatch has been there all around and exists everywhere, except that in countries less corrupted by colonialism sound policies and better implementation are at least in place.

From the early 1960s when most African countries attained independence until present, the burden of raising unhealthy children has been escalating. The situation was quite better a few years after independence until late 1970s after which, due to successive world economic malperfomances, most underdeveloped countries had their immature economies almost collapsed. The countries could no longer continue with their broad welfare policies which ensured free provision of social services, including education, health

and clean water.[31] The countries could not help it. The situation continued to worsen until late 1980s when, after the collapse of the USSR and the triumphing of Western powers, African countries surrendered to conditions that the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank had put forth for them to secure loans and any sort of economic assistance from the West.

The countries, YES, secured the loans from these institutions but have never been able to sufficiently address the situation, especially the ones pertaining to their peoples' welfare. Foreign assistance has distanced the governments in many *third world* countries from the people they are supposed to serve. Since then and until today social spending has significantly reduced, and has negatively impacted the social service provision. Women and children – the ones who are structurally less vocal – suffer the most. In general, this remains the biggest problem to-date, and surprisingly neither governments nor the donors would come out right to say the truth that the best investment a country could make is investing in people,[32] for labor innovations and critical mindedness would always come from them.

Most population control programs are currently defunct or not given the emphasis they deserve, for instance. We do not hear much of family planning and related sensitization campaigns nowadays as it used to be in the early 1990s. Also, the intermittent universalization of primary education in some African countries is but more of a political game aimed at winning majority votes. It is more of selling of our own people for individual benefits. We do not also know what plans are in place to empower these primary school graduates since most of them would not have attained the working age if they happen not to continue with secondary education. These impeded policy making approaches result in some more damaging consequences than we might think. The existing social disconnect has to be bridged.

Implications and way forward

Much has happened in contemporary Africa since the countries started embracing the socially unfriendly policies. Massive retrenchments of workers went hand in hand with budget cuts in education and health; and children as a special group suffer the most. While income is reducing and unemployment in increasing, the cost of living has more than doubled. In fact a randomly or unplanned marketization works to the disadvantage of the African countries' majorities and affects children a great deal since their voice is not loud enough to be heard. Thus, ensuring the good of their parents does significantly translate into the general welfare and upbringing of the children.

For development depends immensely on a country's healthy and well educated populace,[33] we would then repeat a popular call for African governments '*to bring the social back'* if they ever want to develop. But it is until we change our mindset about how we perceive development and the ever-increasing child insecurity in most African countries that these people-centered policies will be mended and implemented. Investing in human capital

will guarantee children of some better childhood security and a bright future that would enable them to contribute to their national development during their adulthood. Considering the ever-increasing wealth gap between the *haves* and *have nots,* a return of greater role by the state to provide for its citizens is much needed to save our children from the hostile world if they get there unprepared.

On bidding farewell upon our eight-week service at a center for *street children* in Dar Es Salaam– Child in the Sun (CIS) – one social worker reminded us of a collective responsibility towards the creation and saving the lives of *vulnerable children.* He asked, "Street children in […] whose responsibility?", and on my mind the question remains unanswered to-date. The need to re-attach ourselves back to our children is an absolute necessity. After all, there is no single adult who hasn't passed through childhood.

Conclusion

This essay has briefly narrated the different childhood experiences in the African continent from pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods. Of the claims it makes includes the deduction that child rearing and childhood experiences in general were better before the alien invasion, and that the advent of colonialism serves as a turning point for the deterioration of the African social conditions from which point life has become miserable. African children were not saved from the humiliation suffered during that time, and whose effects continue until today. This horrible experience has impacted on the way we think, talk and act on addressing children's issues today: I have made a claim that while the society seems to have detached itself from the problem at hand as if the problem is not a product of its deeds, we hypocritically claim as trying to address it. It is this improper approach that leads to bad policies and implementation. I have warned, moreover, that with this behavior of disowning the problem, we show no real commitment to solve the problem, and no tangible outcome should be expected thenceforth.

NOTES

[1] George Orwell. *1984,* (New York, NY: Harcourt, 1949), 56.

[2] See, for example, Tony Waters, "Social Organization and Social Status in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Rukwa," *African Studies Quarterly* 11 No. 1(2009), 57-93; Kumiko Sakamoto, "The Matrilineal and Patrilineal Clan Lineages of the Mwera in Southeast Tanzania," *Utsunomiya University Faculty of International Studies* 26 No. 1 (2008), 1-20; and Juhani Koponen, *People and Production in Late Precolonial Tanzania: History and Structures,* (Helsinki: Finnish Society for Development Studies, 1988).

[3] It started as Structural Adjustment Program (SAPs) and has now changed to national fiscal policies under the Washington Consensus.

[4] Idea adopted from Mr. Yusuf Makamba, the then Dar es Salaam Regional Commissioner in Dar es Salaam city, Tanzania.

[5] Janelle D. Miller and David A. Levy, "Child Labor, Trade and Investment: Toward the Harmonization of International Law," *The American Journal of International Law* 91 No. 4 (1997), 663.

[6] Ibid, 668.

[7] See for example, United Nations Development Program (UNDP), *Human Development Report – The Rise of the South: Human Progress in a Diverse World,* (United Nations Development Program, 2013).

[8] Ibid

[9] Lucy Mair, *African Societies,* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 67.

[10] Kumiko Sakamoto, "The Matrilineal and Patrilineal Clan Lineages of the Mwera in Southeast Tanzania," *Utsunomiya University faculty of International Studies* 26 No. 1 (2008), 1-2.

[11] Kathleen R. Smythe, *Fipa Families: Reproduction and Catholic Evangelization in Nkasi, Ufipa, 1880-1960,* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2006), 114.

[12] Anthony G. Hopkins, *An Economic History of West Africa,* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973), 17.

[13] Hopkins, *An Economic History of West Africa,* 9.

[14] Christopher Isike and Ufo Okeke Ozodike, "Towards an Indigenous Model of Conflict Resolution: Reinventing Women's Roles as Traditional Peacebuilders in Neo-colonial Africa," *African Journal of Conflict Resolution* 11 No. 2 (2011), 35, 41.

[15] Michael B. Adeyemi and Augustus A. Adeyinka, "The Principles and Content of African Traditional Education," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 35 No. 4 (2003), 425.

[16] Ioan M. Lewis, "Islamic Frontiers in Africa and Asia: Africa South of the Sahara," in *The Legacy of Islam (2nd edition)* ed. Joseph Schacht and C.E Bosworth, (Norfolk: 1974), 106-108.

[17] See verses 233 of *sura* 2, and 6 of *sura* 65 in the Holy Quran on protecting lactating mothers.

[18] Hopkins, *An Economic History of West Africa,* 1.

[19] Peter Peals, "What Has Anthropology Learned From the Anthropology of Colonialism?," *Social Anthropology* 16 No. 3 (2008), 281.

[20] Gilbert Gwassa & John Iliffe, *Records of the Maji Maji Rising – Part 1.* Historical Association of Tanzania, Paper No. 4. (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1967), 23.

[21] Gwassa & Iliffe, *Records of the Maji Maji rising – Part 1,* 24.

[22] Moses Ochunu, "Colonialism within Colonialism: The Hausa-Caliphate Imaginary and the British Colonial Administration of Nigerian Middle Belt," *African Studies Quarterly* 10 No. 2 and 3, 95-96.

[23] Michael B. Adeyemi and Augustus A. Adeyinka, "The Principles and Content of African Traditional Education," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 35 No. 4 (2003), 426, 430.

[24] Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony,* (Berkeley & London: University of California Press, 2001), 23-24, 73.

[25] Otherwise known as 'Silver Platter Independence'.

[26] Njoki Nathani Wane, "Is Decolonization Possible?," in *Anti-Colonialism and Education: The Politics of Resistance,* ed. George Sefa Dei and Arlo Kempf, (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2006), 87-88.

[27] Valentine Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge,* (Bloomington, Indianapolis & London: Indiana University Press & James Currey, 1988), 90-95.

[28] Bernard Bashaasha, Margaret Magheni and Ephraim Nkonya, "Decentralization and Rural Service Delivery in Uganda," IFPRI Discussion Paper 01063 (2011), 8, accessed September 29, 2013. http://www.ifpri.org/sites/default/files/publications/ifpridp01063.pdf.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Karen Yoshida, Penny Parnes, Dina Brooks, and Debb Cameron, "A Case Study of the Changing Nature of a Non-government Organisation: A Focus on Disability and Development," *Disability and Rehabilitation* 31 No. 8 (2009), 676.

[31] Generally, all these policies took place under the auspices of the policy identified as *developmentalism* as it spread across the African continent immediately after independence.

[32] Lawrence Summers and Vinod Thomas, "Recent Lessons in Development," *World Bank Research Observer* 8 No. 2, (1993), 245.

[33] Ibid.