

Youth as Social Category and Construction

“I am knowing I am no more child so if this war is ending I cannot be going back to doing child thing” (Iweala, 2005, p. 93).

“As a concept, ‘childhood’ is one of the major accomplishments of the modern era”
(Garbarino, Kostelny, & Dubrow, 1991, p. 10).

The definition of children is more complex than anything articulated in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) would have one believe, with its plain legalistic tone and authority. Childhood is a concept that is deeply-rooted in the human psyche; it is culture- and time- bound; barely biological. Powerful and heuristic, it also guides DDR programming. For the purposes of this study, “childhood” will cover the legal definition of birth to 18 years, while “youth” will signify those up to the age of 24, in keeping with the terms outlined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), African Charter on the Rights and the Welfare of the Child and other legal instruments. This is a choice and is not meant to be definitive. The World Health Organization (WHO) outlines three different categories: adolescents (10 – 19 years-old), youth (15 –24 years- old) and young people (10-24 years-old). Of course, in some societies, women may remain in childhood until giving birth (Mayall, 2002) or men, until they inherit the rights to their parents’ land (James & Prout, 1997). Adulthood may come at a particular birthday (United Nations, 1989) or be achieved through particular rites—be it a marriage ceremony or other complex rituals orchestrated by the community (Evans-Pritchard, 1940). So, while a biological orientation may guide our first notions of the child (e.g. a smaller, less developed person), it soon becomes clear that the concepts of child and childhood are better viewed with “in a socio-cultural context, not just a particular age range” (Lowicki, 2000, p. 10).

Even a cursory visit of the concepts of childhood and youth demonstrates how the meaning of childhood has changed considerably, and how modern attitudes about children and their role within society may vary between cultures. Still, children and youth are generally expected to maintain a subordinate position within their families and communities. Some scholars have suggested that—while done in the interest of bringing children back to psychological and emotional health—post-conflict rehabilitation in fact returns children to “the bottom of the social hierarchy” (Shepler, 2005, p. 205), removing them from decision-making (Utas, 2005b) and stripping them of their moral and political agency (Boyden, 2003; Hart, 2006). This has serious implications for re-integration processes as young people struggle to establish a space for themselves within communities that have established expectations and roles already in place for their returning children and youth. Although thought has moved beyond the classic functionalist approach to recognize the fluidity of identity generally, the concept of “the child” remains largely static even in the face of emerging phenomena that run contrary to our traditional understandings of the social position of children.

“Both childhood and adulthood are socially constructed and are defined within institutional frameworks” (Zegeye, 2004, p. 854). And, as Rex Stainton Rogers warns in his *Social Construction of Childhood* (1989): “Don’t forget that social constructions are not just ideas. They are also what we make and do.” These notions of childhood—what it looks like, when it ends, the social worth, and authority it commands—each help to shape the behaviors of a youth cohort as well as the influence youth may carry within larger systems. Cutting across cultural lines, Bayart (1993) approaches youth from the perspective of their position within the political realm, preferring a study of “the politics of powerlessness,” the affects of the social construct

rather than its individual parts. Others may approach childhood and adolescence from a perspective of presumed innocence. These are choices, equally-valid stand points. They do not, however, represent truths. Nor should they be taken as such. Rather, one could argue that a particular European construct—one that portrays youth as “dependent, immature, and incapable of assuming responsibility, properly confined to the protection of home and school” (Thomas, 2000)—has been “universalized in such a way that youngsters who do not follow this path are considered either to be at risk or to pose a risk to society” (De Boeck & Honwana, 2005, p. 3). Or, alternately considered aberrant, broken, or simply no longer children. Bar-On (2001) critiques the approach taken by those who write about displaced youth, who do so using “criteria that are inappropriate to their particular circumstances, namely, by criteria that derive from Northern, middle-class mores rather than by criteria that reflect the real world [youth] inhabit” (p. 185).

A number of scholars have challenged the universality of measures, notions of childhood (Commaroff & Commaroff, 2005), and the primacy of Piaget (Boyden & Mann, 2001). Liddell (2002) touches on some of the issues in here study of African childhood, points out how norms and expectations differ across cultures. Echoing the early work on attachment in Uganda by Mary Ainsworth (1967), Liddell (2002) takes issue with Western assumptions, for example, of the existence of a single caregiver from infancy to adulthood and that it would constitute or take place within the context of a nuclear family and demonstrates how this is not congruent with the African realities of extended families, multiple wives, traditional systems of fostering, the movement of even young children to urban centers for the purpose of education, and extended separation from family with secret societies while preparing for initiation. Far from the carefree

or idle children of the Western (white, middle-class) imagination, African children are often an integral part of a household's ability to maintain itself, contributing to the viability of an extended family network through their labor and, often, wages. Some have gone as far as to refer to young family members as economic assets, who contribute "non-negligible amounts of income and time" to the household, while additionally playing "important roles in non-income home production and child care activities" (Alimil, Ayanwalel, Bamirel & Bello, 2004; Sijuwade, 1997; Torimiro & Lawal, 2001). Children's participation in the larger political economy is not solely a function of war and the breakdown of norms, as some journalists would have their readers believe. It is, in fact, a crucial norm in the majority of African societies. African children engage in much "adult-like" behavior, when compared to their Western (white, middle-class) peers.

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with larger social systems, outside of an awareness of appropriate etiquette. In “The Political Child,” Twum- Danso argues that this productive role (as opposed to expressive value) is not only a traditional cultural practice, but has been codified in instruments, highlighting participation’s special relevance as it relates to the African context:

As both the 1981 African Charter on Human and People’s Rights (also known as the Banjul Charter) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) emphasize the *duties* of children. This provision is based on the idea that the concept of children possessing responsibilities helps educate others in the value of *children’s contribution to society, a potential contribution that is often overlooked* (G. Van Bueren, 1995, cited in Twum-Danso, n.d.).

Despite their obvious capacity to operate under “adult-sized” pressures as soldiers and primary family caregivers, their demonstrated ability to endure complex challenges, create vital social support networks, and negotiate their own survival, upon their return to communities of origin children and youth are pushed back into roles they have outgrown through the maturing experience of conflict and/or displacement. Children and youth, after having passed through a landscape marked by violence and limited resources are presumed to abandon self-direction and uniformly embrace the guidance of their elders upon their return (Guyot, 2007; para. 7 - 8). Conflict is *transformative*, not simply a disruption of normal daily practices. Along with changes in circumstance and landscape, there are changes in attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs that take place within communities affected by conflict. And yet, there is an assumption that “it is the *duty* of children *to remain children*. That is to say, they must not have the same traits as adults” (Bar-

On, 2001, p. 195; emphasis in original). However, war initiates a process of change that is profound in scope (i.e. behavioral, functional, cognitive, spiritual, eating habits, fashion, gender balance, power relations, identity shifts, etc.) — one that is not guided by the interest of any one social group in maintaining ways that are deemed “traditional”.

In Pupavac’s (2000) estimation, “the conception of childhood itself may hinder approaches to post-conflict reconciliation” as it attempts to reinsert young people back into the “childhood” they’ve outgrown—if they ever had it. These enduring notions of childhood may in turn receive support from humanitarian actors who carry their own culturally-informed ideas about the capacities and limitations of youth, along with a gerontocracy invested in maintaining its own authority. These concepts affect community and public action; they shape programming, and guide the rehabilitation process. However, ignoring the transformation that takes place in young people involved, affected or otherwise associated with fighting forces, and limiting the roles that young people may play only undermines the rehabilitation process and frustrates the potential of these young people to positively contribute to their communities.

Involvement in conflict-related activities can last days or may take place over years (Blattman & Annan, 2006). The timing of the involvement is significant (adolescence, for example) as it relates to personality development. The duration of the experience must also be considered, for all this entails in terms of habits, traits, beliefs, interpersonal communication patterns, and relationship with authority. Conflict-related activities may include the mastery of warcraft (Beah, 2007; Keitetsi, 2004) and political mobilization; but also, issues of psychosocial concerns. Social network formation, creative coping (Nordstrom, 1997); emotional bonding;

procuring food and medical attention, working within power structures (Peters, 2005), asserting leadership, formulating survival strategy; caring for self and others, locating family members in situations of constant movement; engaging in collective action, and developing an awareness of themselves as political actors (Hart, 2006; McIntyre, 2005) all relate to young people's experience during conflict.

African childhood is a social construct that has been informed by multiple challenges including colonialism, traditional belief systems, a collective orientation, internecine conflict, HIV/AIDS, urbanization, the growing reach of evangelical churches, and the architecture of humanitarian aid to name but a few. Discussion around these issues tends to emphasize how these circumstances *force* children to grow up, rather than offer an alternative view of childhood itself—one not predicated on situations of idleness. Wessells & Jonah (2006) ably describe the diversity of war experience in terms of mode of entry, gender, faction, role/status, and individual temperament and talents, cautioning that it would be “inadvisable to think of all young soldiers as having similar duties or as having been affected in similar ways” (Wessells & Jonah, 2006, p. 33). In this manner, the authors effectively reject any monolithic child soldier viewpoint. Findings from the qualitative work (n = 48) that forms the basis of their work reveal that former RUF commanders reported feeling responsible for and connected to the soldiers in their unit, that they “found meaning in spirit of camaraderie they had developed with their subordinates” (Wessells & Jonah, 2006, p. 35). In this, they counter the language of victimization that is often employed when discussing child soldiers. They also challenge western normative ideas of “childhood” when they point out that “it is a misnomer in many parts of Africa to call a fourteen

year old carrying an AK-47 a child soldier since local people may regard that young person as an adult” (Wessells & Jonah, 2006, p. 29).