COMPETING NOTIONS OF CHILDHOODS

PRESENTATION AT THE FIRST LINEA NETWORK ANNUAL MEETING

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Dr. Afua Twum-Danso Imoh,
The University of Sheffield
INTRODUCTION

• Increasingly, childhood is being viewed/discussed as something that is given without much questioning (see Jenks, 1996).

• These assumptions are linked to an image of childhood which was developed in Western Europe from the 17th century onwards (Aries, 1962; Hendrick, 1997).

• Foregrounds:
  • The innocence of childhood;
  • The vulnerability of childhood;
  • The special protection and entitlements required in this phase of life;
  • The need to protect childhood from what were now seen as the responsibilities and sophistications of adult life.

• Preamble: a space in which the child develops his or her personality ‘in an atmosphere of happiness, love, and understanding’, safeguarded from adult responsibilities towards ‘an individual life in society’.

• Article 1: A child is defined as ‘every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier’.

• The principle of survival and development: intrinsically linked to a particular type of development.
AIMS

• To explore the various ways childhood is constructed in different African societies.

• To examine the implications of these constructions on the roles and treatment of children in their societies.

• To explore the possibility of a middle ground based on the impact of social change on these societies.
• Tchibinda and Mayetela (1983): childhood in Zaire traditionally began at birth and continued until the child attained a degree of economic independence and fully participated in the work of adults.

• Ncube (1998): the family determines the tasks which have to be completed before ‘childhood’ in its narrower sense can be determined to have come to an end.
• Last (2003): in pre-colonial northern Nigeria boys became adults by acquiring a wife; girls achieved adulthood on entry into motherhood.

• Schildkrout (1978): in Hausa society the transition to adult status occurs at marriage for a girl, which coincides with sexual maturation.
THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF CHILDHOOD IN GHANA

Research Scope and Methodology

• **Focus:** The Implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in Ghana; focus on Article 12.

• **Research Sites:** Ga Mashie and Nima (in Accra).

• **Time frame:** 10 months of fieldwork in Ghana between May 2005 and March 2006.

• **Methods:**
  - Focus group discussions with 291 children and approximately 100 adults.
  - The administration of questionnaires with 133 children.
  - Interviews with community leaders.
Dependency - Key Component of the Construction of Childhood

- A child is ‘someone who cannot look after himself because he does not work’, ‘cannot pay school fees’ and ‘has no money to look after himself’, which means that ‘his parents take care of him and do everything for him.’

- ‘A child is fed by an adult; a child does not feed an adult.’

- ‘Parents expect you to agree with their decisions, because you are a child, and like it or not, you do it…because you do not feed yourself, you are fed’ (FGD with Elders at the Sempe Mantse We, 8th February 2006).
Childhood as a Period of Training

• ‘All children know their work depending on their sex – if it is a girl she cooks and gives her father food and boys will sweep, clean the father’s shoes, bath and go to school. If the girl is the only girl in the family they will keep her at home while male children go to school and she will look after the family and help mother to sell. Among the fishermen and farmers they keep male children from school to help the father in fishing or farming. When a girl is the first born she is expected to help look after her younger brothers and sisters’ (FGD with Elders at Sempe Mantse Palace, 8th February 2006).

• ‘When a boy is born he is automatically seen as going to help his father on the farm/seashore and for girls, they are to help mother in the house. Children are born to help parents work’ (FGD with Media Professionals, 14th September 2005).
• ‘You get special treatment as a child. If you are a child in the house you would not get as much responsibility as older brothers or sisters. A child is not supposed to do hard work’. (FGD with Children at the Catholic Action for Street Children, October and November 2005).
Having Sense

- A child is someone who is not sensible/does not have sense.

- Features of adulthood
  - ‘when you are of sound mind’;
  - ‘when you know right from wrong you are no longer a child’;
  - ‘when you are mature in the head’;
  - ‘when you know the difference between bad and good’;
  - ‘when a child begins to be responsible’.
‘Who is a child and who is not a child depends on the person’s mind. So if you are 13 and you know how to treat adults then you are an adult and if you are 30 years and do not know how to speak to adults then you are a child. Someone can be old, but if they have the mind of a child they are a child’

(FGD with Congregation at the Kardo Community Mosque, 15th December 2005).
Childhood as Never Ending

- You can be 40/30, but you will still be a child in the eyes of the older people. As long as the older people are alive and you are sitting down with them you are a child. When the fishermen go fishing and they distribute the catch, they do not give any to the youngest – no matter how old he is (FGD Elders at Sempe Mantse We, 8th February 2006).

- Nsamenang (1992: 151) ‘as long as one’s parents are alive a child is always a child’ and must come under ‘some sphere of parental authority even vicariously’
Implications for Children’s Roles and Expectations

- **Dependency** - subject to adult control/authority - restricts ability to express views.

- **Never-ending Childhood**
  - ‘a person in his 20s/30s can still be pushed aside by elder relatives even if they are married and have their own house’ (FGD with Media Professionals 14th September 2005).

- **Motherhood Key to Adulthood**
  - Implications for the Domestication of the CRC in Nigeria
  - Nigerian Children’s Act 2003
THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL CHANGE

• Howard (1990:163): the present and the past tenses are used interchangeably in the literature; traditional African society is frequently referred to as if it still exists in unaltered form’.

• Stephens (1995) questioned the assumption that there exist clearly distinct cultural, each constructing childhood and conditions for the lives of children in their own right.

• Hollos (2002): study of the Pare of Tanzania
  • children in ‘partnership families’ vs. children in lineage-based families
Attitudes Towards Physical Punishment in Ghana

• One year (2009-2010) project funded by the Nuffield Foundation.

• Aim: to explore the extent to which children in Ghana accept their role in society to be disciplined by the various adults in their lives.

• Interviews, questionnaires and diary completion - with children between 10 and 16.

• FGDs conducted with adults
<table>
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<th>Category</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valid 1 Physical</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>30.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Non-physical</td>
<td>34.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Both</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>31.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 None/They don’t Punish Me</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>98.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Missing System</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>100.0</td>
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• ‘In many homes they have a special place for the cane to hang and they may send the child to go and get the cane when they are due for a beating. Sometimes the children break the cane so that it is not in the house. But you go and get one or you ask them to go outside and get a stick’ (MC-2 FGD).
• ‘I don’t get punished at home. My mother just talks or scolds a lot (which I don’t like) but it doesn’t even happen often anyway’ (Novishe, age 13).

• ‘My mother is a very nice woman. Even when we do something wrong, she doesn’t get angry. She will only tell us to stop because it’s not good’ (Kobby, age 12).

• ‘I have not been physically punished in my family before. My parents hardly punish me [in any form] because I do my homework and some of the house chores as well as being sent. I read my [school] books’ (Mawuli, age 12, Diary).
• “We need to be able to correct children through reasoning, talking, counselling, and other punishments such as grounding, putting them in a ‘naughty corner’ and correct their behaviour through the use of positive reinforcement” (MC-3Q).

• ‘I believe children are good listeners, therefore parents should develop the habit of sitting them down and explaining issues to them’ (MC-3Q).
• ‘Parents are what make children stubborn. We do not know how to talk to our children, just shout at them and beat them. We see them as children so we do not have chats/conversations with them, but I think we should not just shout at them and give them orders. We should let them come close to us because when your child comes close to you he will not hide anything from you’ (1st Dodowa FGD).

• ‘If you want your child to be good or do something good for you then it means that we should not talk to them or treat them badly. This means that we should not say something to them that you would not like someone to say to you such as curse them etc’ (2nd Dodowa FGD).

• ‘If I have not shown him enough love then I have no business going to beat my child. That will push him away. You cannot just beat him and not acknowledge the good things he has done. Need to find a balance. You do not want a vicious cycle of just beating the child. You want to form character and help them become confident’ (MC-1 FGD).
• ‘In the old days they [children] were supposed to be seen and not heard, but now they are allowed to vocalise their thoughts without being rude’ (MC-1 FGD).

• ‘There is a cordial relationship. We do not give them [children] freedom to do whatever they want. But we all show a certain level of love. We share their sentiments. We deal with them as children, as people who have their rights’ (MC-2 FGD).

• ‘In our community [professionals/educated] there is more of an open relationship. Children are open with their ideas, more assertive; parents are more open to children’s ideas. The relationship is more cordial...Now parents express their love for other children more, there is more affection and that is the difference. In the past fathers especially did not see it as appropriate to show affection but now they do’ (MC-1 FGD).
CONCLUSION

• Contrasts do exist between social constructions of childhood and global norms.

BUT

• It is critical that in our analysis we also explore the impact of social change on constructions of childhood and child rearing:
  • Which may enable us to identify a middle ground between global standards and local norms and values in relation to child-rearing and socialization process.

• This middle ground that we may identify presents an opportunity for dialogue with local communities