

REBELS, ACTIVISTS, AND REPAIRERS: THE ROLE OF YOUTH IN SOCIAL CHANGE
AFRICA

By

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IN WEST AFRICA

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Abstract

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The popular media commonly depicts children and young people in Africa as either hopelessly undernourished and in desperate need of humanitarian assistance, or as dangerous, unruly and caught up in violence, gang activity, and warfare. As a result there has been a cascade of nongovernmental organizations, relief projects, and development assistance programs over the past three decades that have emerged across the continent. I suggest that while these efforts have had good intentions, they have served to perpetuate the notion that people in Africa are incapable of improving their own social, political, and economic conditions. I argue that youth in Africa have and express agency through education, labor, and mobility, and that their potential to invoke social change can be hindered by an imagined Africa wherein people depend on outside support and intervention for all manner of things. Through activism, collaboration, reparation, and innovation, youth in Africa are dedicated to improving social and economic conditions for themselves, their families, and their communities. By shifting the focus of the media and academia from victimhood to culturally relevant notions of selfhood, we can transform our perceptions of Africa from a continent with a past riddled with tragedy and oppression, to a future laden with potential and dignity. In the face of such obstacles as scarcity, economic instability and civil unrest, youth in Africa have expressed leadership, action, and dedication to their communities in an ongoing and unrelenting struggle to establish a peaceful and prosperous social landscape for themselves and generations to come.

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Preface

Methodology

I have conducted library research for my Master's thesis and have thus primarily relied on information available in books and journals. I have chosen to write my thesis in the format of an annual review of the anthropological literature on childhood in Africa, and I have applied it to the various ways in which youth coming of age in this region express their agency. I have largely drawn from the works of anthropologists who have conducted fieldwork in this region such as Caroline Bledsoe, Alma Gottlieb, Esther Goody, David Lancy, Eric Gable, Nicolas Argenti, Thilde Langevang, John and Jean Comaroff, Deborah Durham, Robert LeVine and Charles Piot, but I occasionally use examples and case studies from other regions or other academic disciplines. Although this is not intended to be a cross-cultural analysis of childhood I sometimes compare African notions of education and labor with those of the United States and Western Europe in order to contrast certain concepts, social structures, and policies.

Chapter 1, Introduction

Challenging Representations: How Popular Media Portrayals of Children in Africa Obscure Their Potential

The media commonly depicts young African children as emaciated and hungry with skinny arms, protruding ribs, and distended bellies. Photographed babies and toddlers with flies and dirt on their faces, sometimes clutch withered-looking mothers or perhaps an empty bowl. Other popular portrayals include boy soldiers clad in military berets and khaki shorts with automatic weapons slung over their shoulders with cold, vacant expressions on their faces. In 2007 CNN World ran a story entitled, “Stolen Kids Turned Into Terrifying Killers” which featured pictures of boys as young as 12 smiling proudly with their guns, and one reporter commented that child soldiers can be “frighteningly cold and effective” (2007). Their vulnerability makes them attractive to militia leaders because they are “easy to manipulate” and will perform horrendous acts of violence on others “without question or protest” (2007). In the same year BBC News published a story on child malnutrition among Ethiopian Somalis with pictures of skeleton-like toddlers lying on the bare floor of a make-shift health post, hooked up to IVs while exhausted mothers sit beside them and pray.

These examples portray children in Africa as either “victims of circumstance and the manipulations of older people in power” or as “unruly, destructive, and dangerous forces needing containment” (Durham 2000). The themes that dominate the Africa sections of both CNN and BBC news websites reflect despair and hopelessness across the continent: “Children suffer in Somali drought” (BBC, 2011), “Ivory Coast army ordered to bases” (BBC, 2011),

“Pirates seize ship off Horn of Africa” (CNN World, 2011), and there is now a Fight Against Child Hunger in Africa Facebook page where members can make donations, view pictures of emaciated children, and learn about nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and nonprofits that are addressing this issue. Judging from these accounts it seems as though the world has a very limited perspective of Africa, and that readers are only interested in gruesome or heart-wrenching stories that appeal to their emotions. One almost never finds stories on mundane topics such as new low-energy irrigation systems for agricultural farms in Kenya, or of successful democratic presidential elections in Senegal under the “Most Read” tab on news websites. This suggests that readers are only interested in the more pervasive stories that feature violence, suffering, civil unrest, and extreme poverty, and that they have little concern for other issues and events across the continent.

Why is it that the media creates such heavily unbalanced news coverage between the unsettling and the mundane? More importantly, what influence has this had on our perceptions of people and events in Africa? It is crucial that anthropologists and other social scientists recognize that children are not only affected by both local and global political and socioeconomic events, but that they are active participants as well. Jean and John Comaroff (1999) argue that youth are political and social actors and to consider their potential for change we must understand them as neither “autonomous liberal actors” or as “overdetermined victims”. In 2000 *Anthropological Quarterly* published two back-to-back themed issues that focused on the social imagination of youth in Africa. Deborah Durham called for a new approach to analyzing youth as the focus of rapid social changes (2000). In a similar vein Sharon Stephens has referred to children as “central figures-and actors- in contemporary

contests over definitions of culture, its boundaries and significance” (1995: vii). To understand generational changes in social and political structures in Africa it is essential that anthropologists go beyond the representations of youth as passive and at the mercy of those in power, or as angered, troubled, and dangerous.

The ‘Paradigm of the Yoke’: A History of Subjugation and Manipulation

Assumptions of victimhood stem from the long history on the African continent of various levels of subjectivity beginning with slavery followed by colonialism and neo-colonialism. According to Jean-François Bayart (2009), this history has led to what Hegel has called the “paradigm of the yoke” (2009:x), wherein academics perceive Africans within a space of dependence, the limits to which have been decided for them. Following Bayart and his notion of a “limbo of the intellect” (2009:xi), I argue that a one-dimensional view of Africa’s relations with the rest of the world inaccurately represents it as “a simple organism that merely reacts to the outrages inflicted on it by its forced dependence” (2009:xi). Bayart believes that there are links between the history of a reluctance to recognize African societies as historical and political entities in their own right and their subjugation by the west during slavery and colonization.

This lack of historicity is rooted in an intellectual tradition that goes back to the time of Aristotle who justified the Greek rule over barbarians because of their “supposed servility” (2009:2). Thus, relations between Europe and Africa have always been unequal because the very different expressions of power and political authority within African societies at the time of contact (and beyond), were so alien to the invaders that they did not see politics at all. One

colonial official viewed Africans as so “different from ours as the breed of Spaniels is from Greyhounds” (Bayart 2009:2). This supposed lack of political will in Africans led to the myth of passivity (see Ferguson 2002), and a pattern emerged wherein peoples of Africa were perceived of as nothing more than “objects of outside manipulation” (Gann and Duignan 1969:10), a reputation that has proven nearly impossible to shed.

By defining Africans by their lack of power, we have perpetuated their dependence through an overwhelming cascade of NGOs, development projects, and relief aid in recent decades. Whereas the good intentions of the agencies and nations that have supplied these organizations and projects are sincere, they have worked to reify the notion that African people would be lost without us. This notion has stuck in our imagination to the extent that it is difficult to perceive peoples of Africa operating in the world without the assistance and close supervision of NGOs, development projects, and aid. It is not my intention to discredit the work that many private donor agencies and international institutions have accomplished in Africa; rather it is to demonstrate how the history of manipulation has given way to one of dependence. This obscures the potential of Africans to instigate change through their own ideas and efforts, and it further marginalizes their participation in global affairs.

Taking the Initiative: How Agency is Expressed Through Education, Labor, and Mobility

In this thesis I intend to demonstrate the various ways in which young adults, children, and even babies express their agency across cultures in Africa. I have chosen to do so through the lenses of education, labor, and mobility because available case studies provide a framework for thinking about young people in this region and how they influence social transformation.

Through a close analysis of these topics and through a discourse analysis of popular media, I will illustrate how young people across Africa work to influence their surroundings in creative and innovative ways, and how they attempt to reconfigure social processes and structures to improve their life circumstances. By confronting institutions and social structures that limit their power, by becoming politically active, by initiating projects to better their communities, and pushing the boundaries of their societies' expectations and restrictions, youth in Africa actively transform the social landscape, and they are quite successful in these endeavors. I argue that the media's representations of skinny, pathetic and disease-ridden children obscure their potential for invoking change. Similarly, depictions of boy soldiers or stories of street violence perpetuate the myth that young African people are dangerous, barbaric, and in need of containment. Whereas, African youth demonstrate their needs, ambitiously work to achieve their goals, and do so in a peaceful and productive manner.

I will discuss how over the past three decades it has been brought to the world's attention by anthropologists and other social scientists that children have political lives. These political lives are affected by social and economic events and transformations both within and beyond national borders. The political lives of children and young adults influence the processes of social change. Children and young adults provoke and engage themselves in these processes. I will briefly define the fluid nature of the term 'youth', and how it will be applied in this paper.

In the second section I will demonstrate how the synthesis of learning and working in Africa fosters agency and self-motivation, and how this prepares children for their progressive

inclusion in the affairs of adults, and readies them for participating in political action and transformation. I will use the practice of apprenticeship as a case study, and will explore how young men in Cameroon have learned to bypass power imbalances that restrict the flow of knowledge, and have incorporated embodied cognition in order to train themselves in the ancient craft of wood carving.

In the third section of the thesis I will discuss the mobility of African children and youth by way of kinship fostering and emigration, and will illustrate how a young girl in Kumasi, Ghana uses her experiences as a foster child as a foundation for her freedom of movement later in life. I then show how young people in Guinea Bissau utilize emigration and transforming traditional funeral ceremonies as a means of expressing their agency.

Finally, I discuss the process of “place-making” among young men in Accra, Ghana and how the claiming of spaces can be a means of empowerment as these spaces become the avenue for discussing neighborhood development, as well as a shared interest in expanding the opportunities for employment and education for young people in this area. In synthesizing these case studies I intend to demonstrate that youth in West Africa, through innovation, collaboration, and activism commonly invoke social change.

Save the Children: How Transformations in the Global Political Economy Impact the Lives of Children

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund launched a series of economic growth and development projects. Policy changes allowed poor countries to get new loans or obtain lower interest rates on existing loans with the goal of

reducing the borrowing country's fiscal imbalances. This would allow the country to become more market orientated by focusing on trade and production in order to boost the economy. These Structural Adjustment Policies (SAPs) included internal changes in privatization and deregulation of public services, as well as external changes in trade policies that were meant to make the global economy more accessible to poor countries. Anthropologists Carolyn Sargent and Nancy Scheper-Hughes argue that these policies not only failed to change the living conditions of the world's poor, but that they actually worsened the situations of some of these peoples (1998; see also Kamara 1997, Booth 2003, and Farmer 1999). This was a pivotal moment in the construction of the modern perception of childhood as the "muted, sickly cries of children were often the best indicators of the consequences of major political and global economic transitions" (1998:2). Because structural adjustments cut into public expenditure programs for education, health care, and social welfare, women and children were among the most adversely affected groups of people.

As the international community began to realize that the actions of those in power were severely affecting the lives of children, to counter SAP policies, UNICEF launched new projects in the 1980s and 90s which combated child suffering in Third World countries. Urban Jonsson, the UNICEF Director for Eastern and Southern Africa has stated that we have moved into "the era of the rights of the child" (2002), as international conventions and governments have begun to assume legal obligations that mark a shift in the way we approach children and youth. UNICEF enacted an aggressive child survival campaign which decreased infant and child mortality using simple, low-cost, and low-technological methods. The campaign included growth monitoring, encouragement of breastfeeding, immunization, and the distribution of oral

rehydration therapy (ORT) salts. These quick fix, simple solutions failed to address complex social problems embedded in power imbalances. Larger, structural issues need attention, like post-colonial politics and trade and labor policies. These programs did not account for realities such as lack of access to clean drinking water and a cultural preference for powdered milk over breast milk. According to Scheper-Hughes, "ORT was no substitute for ample breast milk, clean water, attentive nurturing, accessible medical care, adequate housing, fair wages, universal public education, and sexual equality, all of these being prerequisites for child survival" (1998:4). In fact ORTs prolonged the suffering of many children, a tragic occurrence that Scheper-Hughes witnessed while conducting research among poor shantytown families on a Brazilian sugar plantation throughout the 1980s and 90s. Despite the good intentions of the UNICEF child survival campaign it ultimately failed because it did not account for the social structures, policies, and relationships that were at the core of the suffering of children.

As economic structures and the ideologies that supported them began to change, the 1980s became a time of renegotiation and reinterpretation of how global processes affect children, especially poor children. Robert Coles argues that national identities and political contexts are deeply embedded within children's morality, security, and ways of thinking about the world (1986). In *The Political Life of Children*, he suggests that a nation's politics becomes a child's everyday psychology. It was at this moment in history that adults around the world began to recognize that children have a political life (1986). In 1990 the world's government leaders ratified the document of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* at the New York City World Summit for Children.

Anthropologists were concerned with the universality of the approach of the convention, as well as the fact that “the rhetoric could serve as a screen for the transfer of Western values and economic practices” (Sargent and Scheper-Hughes, 1998:7). For example the revised document encouraged the perception of all people as rights-bearing individuals which did not take into account the many world populations wherein larger social units such as extended families, lineages, and villages are valued over the individual and thus have different notions of “person” or “child” altogether. What is needed according to Sargent and Scheper-Hughes is a critical reflexive anthropology where categories are not naturalized or essentialized to the extent that “local context is obscured and important differences are flattened” (1998:10) and one that accepts the fact that “local societies and cultures are at least as much influenced today by what goes on outside their borders as within them” (1998:10). If anthropologists are to move towards the critical reflexive anthropology that Sargent and Scheper-Hughes are calling for, I would argue that the first step is to challenge representations of children in Africa (and in other poor and marginalized regions) as at the mercy of those in power or as dangerous and in need of containment.

Who can be termed ‘youth’?: Identity and Social Shifters

To understand role and agency of youth in social transformations and it is necessary to determine who call themselves “youth”. This is especially relevant in light of Argenti’s (2002) observation that debates around youth in Africa tend to take for granted the assumption that youth are a simple demographic group, in both academic and popular discourses. According to Deborah Durham, in Botswana, the category of youth is “highly contested and rapidly

changing” (2004:592). In the past members of youth organizations have included individuals in their mid to late forties, and others have claimed that only older teenagers and people in their early twenties ought to be considered youth. In the 1990s new understandings of youth began to align with those individuals who were or could be in school. In 1996 the government released a National Youth Policy, which clearly defined youth as people between the ages of 12 and 29 (2004). Not only is the category of youth relational, argues Durham, but by invoking youth as a political or pragmatic act suggests that youth ought to be perceived as social “shifters” (2004:592). A shifter is an aspect of the cultural world that is independent of a particular use, thus a shifter can only be understood in the context of a particular use because its meaning transforms with each use.

It is important for studies of youth to examine not just their experiences or their activities, but also their agency, their reactions to political events, and finally the processes through which different groups of people claim the identity of youth or designate others as youth. Through these processes we can see how the category is reconstructed in different contexts and under different circumstances. Returning to the example of Botswana’s national policy on youth, “to be in the space of youth is to be able to claim certain rights and abilities including rights to be on an upwardly mobile track to white collar or bureaucratic employment, rights to government empowerment initiatives, rights to grants for youth groups, and rights to work for national goals” (Republic of Botswana 1996). However, the space of youth also includes individuals who are not taking up these rights and obligations: Street children, older teenagers and young adults still living “entirely” at home, the unemployed, and the delinquents that are only interested in sex, drugs, and consumable goods.

The category also must account for the variation of experiences between people who are considered youth because, as stated above, different contexts shift the meaning. For example, a girl of seventeen who is the youngest child in her household and whose parents have the economic means to support her education is in a very different situation from a girl of a similar age who is the oldest child in a large family and whose mother has recently died. Because the former is now responsible for her younger siblings, as well as managing her household and earning an income, her situation places her in an entirely different realm of existence than the first girl. Children begin their shift into maturity in Botswana when they begin to manage other people and material things (Durham 2000), thus people within the same community and perhaps even within the same family can have drastically different life circumstances and experiences yet still share the identity of youth because the category is flexible. It is contingent on context and it is thus utilized and interpreted in multiple ways.

For the sake of this paper I will refer to all individuals as “youth” who clearly identify themselves as such (or who have been identified as youth by anthropologists). Because the category is defined by life stage rather than numerical age, the boundaries between youth and adult are culturally constructed, and subject to change and renegotiation over time. I suggest that the term is also highly contingent on political and social circumstances, and that there are fundamental differences across generations regarding who in a given time and place can be considered youth and who cannot. It is also important to be aware of the fact that many cultures differentiate between genders in classifying youth because girls may marry and start their own families at a considerably younger age than their male counterparts. In this thesis, I

embrace the malleable concept of youth as I apply it to the various groups and individuals across Africa who declare it as an aspect of their identity.

Chapter 2, Education and Labor

All Work and No Play?: A Child's Contribution

Work for children in Africa is valued and expected and parents believe that even young children have a social responsibility to contribute their time and labor. But what is work to an African child? More importantly, how does the nature of work in Africa complicate Western assumptions about child labor and childhood in general? For the sake of this argument I view work as any activity that contributes to the everyday flow of household maintenance or production, or participation in the vocations of parents and other adults. Work is not seen as a negative experience because it equips children for the challenges of daily life: Practical and social skills are learned through house chores and sibling care, and economic competence is fostered by running errands and hawking goods (Verhoef and Morelli 2007). In Africa work is seen as a crucial aspect of preparing a child for adulthood and teaching him or her the importance of cooperation and collaboration. This is an important lesson in a context where the well-being of the group trumps that of the individual, and thus work is one way of expressing one's dedication to his or her family or social unit.

Children who participate in household maintenance, the cultivation of crops, and the rearing of younger children are better prepared for adulthood than those who do not (Goody 1982, Lancy 2008, and Small 2001). This follows the notion that a successful adult in Africa is a productive adult, and that hard work expresses an individual's value of his or her family. In this chapter I intend to demonstrate that even though work is *expected* by parents, it is children who generally incorporate themselves into the daily household work regime. I argue that this is

an expression of agency as these children desire participation and recognition of their competency, and that they are eager to demonstrate their abilities. I will review the literature on child labor in Africa and I will demonstrate how it is viewed as a necessary aspect of learning in most communities.

Throughout Africa it is common to see children working alongside their parents and older siblings in agricultural production, and they are often assigned to care for and look after the family's animals and livestock. In societies where much of the daily work takes place away from the family compound or household such as agrarian communities, children take on much of the care of younger siblings while their parents are busy with their own work. Older daughters may accompany their mothers to the market to buy and sell goods, and sons will assist their fathers in herding cattle and goats. Even children as young as three or four are expected to contribute to household labor and they are commonly sent to get water or collect firewood.

In Africa as soon as children are capable of understanding instructions they are incorporated into daily chores and household maintenance, and their participation will progressively increase as they develop (see LeVine et al 1988, Small 2001, Nsamenang 1992, Whiting 1941, and Mohammad 1997). The synthesis of learning and working in African village life is well documented in the literature and I will illustrate how through what David Lancy refers to as the "chore curriculum" (2008), children actively engage in needed tasks while they are learning and perfecting their skills. Furthermore, in contrast with an academic curriculum, in the chore curriculum evidence of teaching is rare (LeVine 1994), and children are expected and encouraged to learn on their own. That is to say parents and other adults allow children to

watch as they work, however this is limited to visual demonstration and parents rarely narrate as they carry out the activity (White 1959, see also Lancy 1996, and Spittler 1998).

According to ethnopediatric anthropologist Meredith Small, childhood in most areas of the world is a time for work and not play. She claims that learning occurs through experience and the application of skills and knowledge that have been observed and imitated rather than with books or direct instructions from adults. In a survey of 186 cultures around the world, researchers found that older kids are the primary caregivers of toddlers and younger children (Small 2001). The seven-year-olds that were observed caring for their younger siblings emulated the high pitched voices their mothers use when talking to babies, and they carried them in the same way that mothers do. They were surprisingly attentive to the needs of their charges, and they were experts at keeping little kids out of harm using warnings their own parents and older siblings had used such as 'it is hot', 'it is sharp' or 'there are snakes'! (Lancy 2008:220) Thus young children learn about their environment and their surroundings from slightly older children who imitate the care practices of their parents and older siblings. I see this form of learning as a means of fostering independence and personal responsibility because children learn early on that their survival is contingent upon their own abilities to pay close attention, to take their work seriously, and to practice maturity and respect in the presence of adults.

A Child-Supported Society: The Benefits of Growing Up in a Gerontocracy

A framework for approaching the synthesis of learning and working is through the concepts of neontocracies and gerontocracies. Contrary to American and Japanese cultures,

which Michael Lancy refers to as 'neontocracies' or child-centered societies, most African cultures are considered 'gerontocracies' or child-supported societies (2008:11). In a neontocracy babies and children are worshipped, they are believed to be deserving of a long and carefree childhood during which their parents and extended families make little or no demands on them. A gerontocracy is the exact opposite: The society is dominated by attention to the oldest members where children are expected to contribute to household labor almost as soon as they can walk. As a child *supported* society a gerontocracy heavily depends on children to carry out menial tasks, such as fetching water, which adults are too busy to do. In Africa, work "opens the pathway to adulthood" (Lancy 2008:234). The labor of children is needed and valued and many spend much more time engaged in work than in play. But, this is not negative or problematic in that work is directly associated with learning, growing, and taking on responsibility (see Small 2001 for similar examples of this in other regions). I believe that agency develops through participation in household and community labor because children realize that success and recognition from adults comes through persistence and dedication.

Whereas the neontocracy verses gerontocracy dichotomy helps us to understand child labor in specific contexts, I would argue that it is possible that the two social forms can exist in tandem, and that they commonly do. Alma Gottlieb has studied Beng infants of Côte d'Ivoire who are lavished with affection by their mothers and other women in the community, and it is believed that these infants express their wants and desires to local diviners and these wishes are granted despite the high costs of the expensive jewelry and colonial coins that they often "request" (2004). But as these babies grow and thrive their hold on life is said to become progressively less tenuous and they eventually join older children in their daily chores and

labor. Thus children can be cherished and idolized while simultaneously expected to work and contribute to the household or the wider community. What Gottlieb helps us understand through her work with the Beng peoples is that children do not contain innate value in the imagination of adults across cultures, but rather how they are received as infants and small children is contingent upon life circumstances (see also Scheper-Hughes and Sargent 1998, and Dettwyler 1994).

Lancy (2008) claims that a traditional gerontocracy is indicated by children being required to spend at least some of their time engaged in work, however, I argue that even in these circumstances we can still think of these societies as *both* gerontocracies and neontocracies. Because work “opens the pathway to adulthood,” it is seen as a necessary aspect of proper development. The child that isn’t incorporated into the household labor is seen as less prepared for adulthood than the child that is, thus the opportunity to work is valued and even commoditized in some cases, a point I will return to in the apprenticeship section below.

Work as Education: Imitation, Observation, and Legitimate Peripheral Participation

The tendency for children in Africa to learn through imitation and observation rather than through direct instruction from adults is well documented in the literature. Among the Wolof people of Senegal parents will never quiz their kids by asking known answer questions (Irvine 1978) (i.e. “what does the ducky say?”) because such questioning indicates a riddle with a trick answer or a direct challenge, and it is considered an insult to ask someone a question when the response is obvious or common knowledge. Because children can see, hear, taste,

and feel in the same way that adults can it is assumed that sensory observations are established in the child's mind and it is thus unnecessary to quiz him on such matters. Parents in Africa are confident that children will absorb knowledge and abilities as they develop and that much of their learning will be orchestrated by their own curiosity and eagerness to be included in the activities of adults and older children. Little direction is needed and there is no rush to educate children about their surroundings because it is expected that children will naturally decipher things on their own.

An intriguing aspect of child labor in Africa is that children commonly incorporate themselves into the work force with "little or no guidance from adults" (Lancy 2008, see also LeVine 1989, Nsamenang 1992, and Small 2001). Through observation and imitation children will progressively increase their level of participation in the work of older children and adults as they mature. Robert LeVine (1994) claims that children growing up in African villages often learn through what Lave and Wenger call "legitimate peripheral participation" (1991:90) wherein their contribution starts off as minimal but gradually increases as their observations allow them to become more familiar with the routines and the strategies that are utilized in the work, until they are eventually fully absorbed into the activity. This form of participatory learning involves little parental intervention because much of it takes place within the context of the group of siblings and cousins, and younger children not only imitate the skills of older and more experienced children, but also their language, their respect and deference to adults, and their gender roles.

For example in pastoralist societies little boys will “trail after” (Lancy 2008:239) young males as they go out to herd their animals each day, and much of their interaction is with herders who are slightly older than them and not adults. Ngoni boys of East-Central Africa work their way up from tending a goat to a calf to a sheep to a cow and finally to multiple cattle, all the while becoming experts at classifying cattle according to age, sex, color, shape of the horns, and whether or not they have been castrated. These boys rarely approach adult herders for advice or with questions because they do not want to display ignorance in front of their superiors, or risk questioning their authority (Messing 1985). The significance of this case is twofold: it reflects my earlier statement that productivity is important to adults and they do not perceive training young children as a valuable use of their time. It also suggests that in some cultures it is considered “developmentally more critical” (Nsamenang 1992: 426) for a child to take orders and advice from another (slightly older and more mature) child. This expands the responsibility of the older children to direct and coach their younger peers and fosters leadership and collaboration.

Adults recognize the advances in children’s skills by assigning them more responsibility or perhaps giving them their own tools or plot of land to work with. Children are rarely praised for their improvements because it is believed that this will make them big headed, overconfident, and may even lead to laziness. Parents expect their children to work hard because it benefits the family, the social group, and the community, and not for their own fulfillment.

One of the major assumptions about child labor is that it interferes with the child's opportunity to get an education as indicated by child labor laws combined with mandated education in the United States. However, this assumes that there is a clear distinction between learning and working, but according to the anthropological literature this is not the case. In Africa many children attend school and each year more and more students are continuing their studies in higher education, with university enrollment at an all-time high. But for the children who do not attend school, only attend part time, or who are not yet old enough, learning is still a major aspect of their lives, although not always in a classroom setting. In a rural village education is not confined to a classroom or textbooks (Lancy 2008, see also Goody 1982), it happens everywhere and for children of all stages. There is always an assortment of tasks to be done and by carrying out these tasks children not only learn the components of their societies' modes of production; they also practice cooperation and trial and error methodology.

In many African communities much of the work that is expected of children has an inherently developmental character (Lancy 2008). They may be provided with scaled down versions of adult tools with the goal of fostering dexterity and precision, or they may be expected to carry increasingly heavy burdens to the market or to and from the fields in order to build the strength and endurance that is required when engaged in hard labor. For any given child's age and level of strength and competence there are always a few tasks that are considered "just right" (Lancy 2008:236).

It is common in Senegalese households to find containers of a variety of sizes and girls will troop to the well to fetch water and each girl's container will be of relative size to that of

her head (Irvine 1978). As girls grow and become more accomplished at balancing they will increase the amount of water they can carry in each trip. Because milestones in a child's assumption of responsibility are widely acknowledged in the community, children are eager to fulfill their obligations and happily anticipate being granted further duties. When adults assign new jobs to a child that have higher levels of risk and liability than previous chores (such as processing foods that if done incorrectly will lead to wastefulness and loss of product), they see it as a reflection of their competence and this fosters confidence and initiative behavior. It has been observed in Côte d'Ivoire that young children between the ages of two and three take great pleasure in being sent on small errands and mothers consider this task to be preparation for carrying out jobs that involve greater responsibility (Gottlieb 2004).

Much of the work that is assigned to children can be done in groups of peers and thus work becomes an opportunity to socialize as well as to foster collaboration and cooperation. These peer groups are often made up of children of mixed ages which allows younger children to learn from older children and these older children in turn practice leadership and delegation. I see this as another example of how agency develops in African cultures because children learn to take initiative in directing those who are younger than them in both work and play. Thus, when there is a task to be done and there are no adults around, an older child will take on the role of instructor to his or her younger siblings or playmates.

The Control of Knowledge: Apprenticeship and Embodied Learning

Avenues for the transferring of knowledge across generations are culturally constructed, and in some societies the careful distribution of knowledge reflects the fact that the knowledge

and skills that are associated with a craft or an occupation are considered a commodity. Anthropologist, Esther Goody argues that when the division of labor extends beyond the domestic mode of production, there must be mechanisms in place “for transmitting specialist skills from one generation to another” (1989: 237). The first edition of the Encyclopedia of Social Sciences defines apprenticeship as “a method of passing on acquired trade skills and of maintaining a supply of craftsmen” (Seligman and Johnson 1930). Thus, apprenticeship is not simply a method of learning or teaching, but rather it is linked to the wider economic system.

In many African communities the labor of children is exchanged for their training in critical skills associated with a specialist craft or occupation, a practice that may be termed kinship fostering. Children may be sent to live with a ‘master’ for an extended period of time (several months to several years), where they are expected to progressively absorb the skills and knowledge of the trade and their education is funded by the labor they provide. A young apprentice may be required to do tedious, repetitive, and menial tasks for long hours each day and to show respect for his master and defer to him without question. The labor in the early stages of an apprenticeship match the ability of the learner, and it acts as a form of pre-payment for the opportunity, as well as a measure of his level of motivation. A practitioner will only be interested in taking the time to instruct a pupil if he has demonstrated proper aptitude and willingness to learn (Lancy 2008). In most craft production talent is considered to be developed through persistence, and is not seen as inherent or innate. Thus, a truly dedicated apprentice eagerly carries out his duties and is constantly hoping to be granted further responsibility. But when he is learning a complex craft such as weaving, he is commonly constrained to make only small advances at a time, reducing the likelihood of mistakes that an

expert would have to correct (or that materials will be wasted or damaged by the novice). This allows the master to move on to more complex activities usually in the near vicinity, permitting the learner to continue with his work while observing that of the master. Bruner (1976) refers to this as “scaffolding” which he defines as “the process by which those who are already expert, structure an activity so that novices can participate” (Goody 1989:236). The activities of an apprentice reflect his age and skill level as demonstrated by the general pace at which a young weaver learns the craft. At eight he is preparing bobbins for the practitioners, a few years later he is weaving plain white bands on a loom an expert has set up for him. The following year he may be allowed to weave patterned blankets, and finally around age eighteen he may set up his first warp “under the close scrutiny of his master” (Tanon 1994:26). Thus, there is a long and carefully articulated journey that begins with minimal and simplistic participation that slowly accumulates over time, and after many years of dedicated perseverance the apprentice is allowed to produce his own materials and begin to formulate his own style.

Although apprenticeship is a common form of learning, it is *not* considered to be a form of teaching because skills are acquired through observation rather than verbal instruction or demonstration. Novices are discouraged from asking questions because it is believed that the mastery of skills is accomplished through active participation, and the answer would be obvious. Thus, the practice of apprenticeship forces us to separate learning from teaching. Because work and not education is the reason an apprentice is present in a workshop, and because both apprentice and master are aware of the fact that skills are fostered through participation, there is little need for verbal instruction. An apprentice lacks an understanding of the materials and the technology, as well as the premises that influence their integration, all of

which are highly specific to specialty occupations, and are often implicit or only understandable through long familiarity with working with the material (whether it is wood, glass, clay or textile). These skills must be learned, however, they cannot be taught. This is another example of Lave and Wenger's "legitimate peripheral participation" (1991), which is defined by learners participating in communities of practitioners and slowly increasing their participation as their knowledge and skill levels develop.

According to Goody, when what is to be learned is "is a blend of mental and physical representations and skills of widely varying levels of specificity" (1989:247), an exclusively verbal manner of instruction simply will not suffice. This reflects a branch of modern language theory called "activity theory" which views learning as something that does not take place within the learner's head while they are listening to a teacher or reading a book, but rather it is a process that is "fundamentally interactive" (Goody 1989:253) in nature. I suggest that activity theory also works through embodied cognition, which is the process through which understanding in the mind is achieved through the body. Because cognitive processes are "deeply rooted in the body's interaction with the world" (Wilson 2002:625), it is necessary for an apprentice to physically mimic the movements of the master in order for him to understand how the materials are manipulated.

It is uncommon for an apprentice to ask questions during his work because in some African communities this is a sign of disrespect. This produces a very particular learning relationship as the student is not permitted to ask questions, but must instead carry out his duties to the best of his abilities, and patiently wait to be assigned more advanced

responsibility. As technique develops over time, it is expected that the careful manipulation of materials will eventually become routine. Accomplishments rest on elementary principles such as maturity, ability to pay attention, ability to mimic or copy faithfully, and ambition to excel (Lancy 2008). Thus, teaching and learning are not essential ingredients in the successful transfer of knowledge from generation to generation, but rather active participation- the doing- is what is important.

Training in a craft or an occupation by way of apprenticeship has a purely economic characteristic as well: knowledge is imparted but in a manner that restricts its free flow. Knowledge in specialized occupations is a scarce resource, which allows artisans to monopolize it, and distribute it sparingly so as to maintain high levels of demand in the market, but consistent or limited levels of the supply of skilled labor. Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that there is no objective or immutable body of knowledge that is simply waiting around to be handed over like a commodity. Thus, in the context of apprenticeship knowledge is not a thing but rather it is a relationship that is constantly being renegotiated over time as the pupil advances. The inclusive character of apprenticeship is not just a reflection of the careful distribution of occupational knowledge, but can also be a product of deeply embedded social inequalities that dictate power relations, as indicated by the case study of wood carvers in Oku, Cameroon.

Cultural anthropologist, Nicolas Argenti conducted ethnographic fieldwork among wood carvers in Cameroon who have been denied the opportunity to learn the craft through apprenticeship. Among the people of Oku only those of the royal lineage (Mbele) are

permitted to become apprentice and master carvers. Through marriage and familial alliances members of other lineages can move into that of the royal lineage, and they can also gain access to the exclusive palace (kwifon) by becoming renowned carvers. In the past the carving occupation in Oku has been restricted to members of the palace society (made up of both Mbele royal lineage members and commoners), and to be a formal apprentice one must have been a member of both kwifon and the Mbele lineage.

Argenti found that carvers with no formal apprenticeship training had been setting up their own workshops in the region for many years. In fact, it is now the case that the majority of practicing carvers did not gain their qualifications from a master, but rather learned the techniques and processes on their own. However, they still remain relatively marginalized mainly because of their lack of access to tools. In the past an apprentice received his own tools from his master at the final ceremony that marked the end of his initiation, and his formal acceptance into the royal profession. The one implement that marks an apprentice as an independent and self-sufficient carver is the bellows (or kelam; a device that is used to deliver a controlled quantity of pressurized air into a controlled location), the production of which is closely monitored by master carvers. Those who have not undergone an official apprenticeship are thus dependent on those who have or on smiths in order to make their own tools. Possession of the bellows indicates inclusion in the restricted group of apprenticed carvers who have the privilege of being affiliated with the palace. Groups of carvers who are not joined with the royal lineage can occasionally buy or borrow industrially produced stainless steel tools, but they also commonly share a set of tools in community workshops.

The objects that non-apprenticed carvers produce differ from those of master carvers in that they are meant for two distinct sets of consumers. Master carvers make masks, stools, and house posts which are incised with symbols of royalty and other objects of ceremonial use for titled men belonging to the palace hierarchy. Non-apprenticed carvers generally produce objects that are “explicitly associated on the one hand with a (locally constructed) international urban modernity, and on the other with symbols of nationhood” (Argenti 2002:511). These symbols of nationhood (including lions, symbols of the ruling party, pictures of the president, and images of the national football team) represent the shift to a new hierarchy of elites that no longer places power and authority in the domain of the palace, but rather on the state. This directly challenges the royal monopoly on carving as young men have figured out how to bypass the palace hierarchy and to earn a living by selling their products to tourists and other Cameroonians who are also excluded from the kwifom. Thus, non-apprenticed carvers in Oku “find their significance” in a “space of innovation that introduces historical change” (Argenti 2002:514). By expanding the market for wood carved products to include those that are not meant to be affiliated with the palace hierarchy, young carvers in Oku have bypassed the exclusive aspect of the profession, and have created a means through which they can produce objects and sell them based on their renegotiated local significance.

Chapter 3, Mobility

Adapting to Environments: Kinship Fostering and the Development of Agency

Movements of people have become a significant aspect of African cultures; something I believe can be attributed to large extended families and lineages commonly being spread over large geographic spaces, and a long history of reorganization as different groups have renegotiated relations with others through the careful reworking of space. During the time of the Atlantic Slave trade many villages were forced to relocate to more isolated areas further away from the trade routes in order to be free of the fear of invasion and enslavement. During colonialism migration labor became common in many parts of Africa as workers were needed on large settler plantations in rural areas, and street cleaners and domestic servants were needed in urban centers. Following colonialism, civil war and unrest led to a further reshuffling of peoples as neighboring villages had been turned against each other by the colonists who commonly enlisted certain ethnic groups as overseers and others as workers, leading to conflict and tensions that did not evaporate into thin air upon national independence. Thus, mobility is a common unifying factor of a diverse set of peoples across the region. In this section I demonstrate how young people have begun to use mobility as a foundation for agency, and that through kinship fostering and emigration, young people learn to adapt to new environments and changing circumstances, and to create avenues for social change and transformation.

Child fosterage, defined as children being raised by adults other than their biological parents, is a form of resource distribution among households of both kin and nonkin, and can also be a means of social mobility if the child is being relocated to a prestigious or wealthy

home. Fostering is also practiced in order to facilitate schooling, or to learn a trade or an apprenticeship. Crisis situations such as the death of a parent or divorce sometimes call for fostering as parents can rely on their families to care for their children if and when they cannot do so themselves. The practice of child fostering in Africa supports the balance of resources across households, it acts to cement relationships both within and between families by recognizing the shared membership and participation in an extended network of persons, and it socializes children by widening their experiences and expanding relationships.

In many African communities wealth and security lie in people and relationships much more than in money and material property (Bledsoe 2002, see also Piot 1999, and Langevang 2008). Because fostering takes place within the kinship framework and because children belong to the lineage or kinship group, fostering is largely a consequence of the need to reallocate resources within the extended family, which ensures maximum survival for the unit while strengthening kinship ties.

In sub-Saharan Africa a woman's social status is often marked by her reproductive success and thus high fertility is common and leads to large families (see Vandermeersch and Chimere-Dan 2002 and Bledsoe 1995). When children are young they are seen as a liability, however as they age they become increasingly more valuable, especially in terms of domestic labor. Elderly grandparents can benefit from the help of children who can fetch water, prepare meals, and run errands. Children are also commonly fostered out to homes where there are few or no children because of infertile women, because the children of that household have grown up, or because they have experienced child loss. In such situations foster children provide emotional relationships with their caretakers in exchange for their stay. Scholars have

argued that the practice of child fostering is a mechanism for reducing demographic imbalance between houses with too few children and those with too many (Vandermeersch and Chimere-Dan 2002).

How welcomed a child is in a foster home is usually dependent on the situation in which they were sent there. Children do not seem to fare well when their foster parents were forced to take them in, usually in crisis situations (Verhoef and Morelli 2007, see also Bledsoe 1995). If their biological parents are not sending compensation for the care the child may be seen as a liability and a threat to the resources allocated to other children, which could obviously affect their treatment.

Cultural anthropologist, Sarah Castle (1995) demonstrates how different circumstances can guide the decision to foster-out a child taking her cue from the work of Esther Goody (1982) who describes various “push” and “pull” factors. She argues that “push” factors are often crisis-oriented in that they consist of variables that threaten the child’s access to resources and perhaps even their chances of survival (such as divorce, death, or widowhood of the mother, or the parent’s migration to an urban area). She defines “pull” factors as those reasons wherein a foster mother would benefit from the child’s relocation to her home (such as the need for labor or companionship, or future support from the child). Push and pull factors highlight the notion that the value of a child changes as he or she passes through developmental stages, as well as the fact that children benefit a family or household via their labor contribution, but this advantage is preceded by a period of time where they require close supervision, protection, and care. Infants and toddlers absorb the energy and attention of their caretakers, yet older children are needed for their labor and production. The institution of child fostering thus

becomes one way of managing resources in a context of scarcity through group cooperation and a system of communal support.

I suggest that the practice of fostering can be a framework for analyzing agency among children in Africa I will use Hawa from John Chernoff's *Hustling is Not Stealing: Stories of An African Bar Girl* as a case study to illustrate this point. Hawa is a girl from Kumasi, Ghana who is fostered out to relatives in the wake of her mother's death. She begins her story:

My mother died when I was three years old, and my father had no other wife. He had children with other women, but my mother was the first wife of my father. I had brothers and sisters, and we all had to leave. We didn't live together. This one lived with the grandmother, and another lived at the family of my father. You know, my family: they are very many. My mother's side is a big family; my father's is big, too. So all my brothers and sisters who were with my father, they just shared us like that. We didn't go together. So I had to be handed there, there, and there, to the families (2003:121-122).

Hawa describes how she was passed from house to house, and how she is beaten and overworked by her paternal aunts, but received lovingly in her grandmother's home which is where she spends her early years. When she is sent to her aunts to receive housetraining she is naughty and stubbornly runs away on multiple occasions and returns to her father. As a nine-year-old she has such a vicious confrontation with one of her aunts one night (who forces her to carry all of their provisions to and from the market each day while she and her own daughter go unburdened in a taxi), that her uncle must take her back to her father's house at 3AM. Her father begs her to behave before she is sent to his sister's house where she once again runs away and is allowed to return to her grandmother. Hawa's curiosity gets the best of her one day when she follows her grandfather, the chief of the village, and a small group of men into the bush to perform a religious ceremony that could only be witnessed by mature males. She is discovered by the group and sent back to her father's house once again for failing to respect

sacred customs.

As Hawa is passed from guardian to guardian and travels across a considerably large geographic space she encounters good and bad relationships with her caretakers, and she consistently refuses to submit to their demands and expectations of her while living in their homes. With this refusal to submit to authority, an especially undesirable trait for a young woman to possess in this culture, Hawa asserts her agency by taking control of her own life. After her father marries her to an older man with several wives to which she is expected to defer, Hawa runs away from her husband just as she did from her foster families, and decides to live alone as a single and unmarried woman in an urban marketplace with only her elderly blind aunt as a companion.

I hypothesize that this is an example of how young African children are not at the mercy of the “manipulations of older people in power” as argued by Durham above. By failing to conform to the cultural expectations of a young woman Hawa contributes to the transformation of her society by transcending boundaries and establishing an alternative lifestyle for herself and other young women who may choose to follow her example.

In 1990 Caroline Bledsoe studied the relationship between older foster children and their caretakers in which she found that “hardship” is considered a crucial aspect of the development of the Mende young adult. Children in this age bracket are sent to live with foster parents who will be more capable of inflicting the harsh treatment that is believed to be a necessary component of their upbringing. Children in Mende communities who are pampered or fed to “satisfaction” are said to lack the motivation to rise beyond their present conditions (Bledsoe 1990). While in Sierra Leone Bledsoe commonly heard the popular Mende saying “no

success without struggle”, which she also saw painted on houses, buses, and taxis throughout the country (Bledsoe 1990). Thus what outsiders may term as abuse or neglect the Mende believe to be a period of deliberate unsympathetic treatment with the goal of building the endurance and molding of the character that is necessary to take on the challenges of adulthood. I see the “no success without struggle” aspect of the Mende practice of fostering as a means of inspiring agency in young people. It is a time to show teenagers that they are the facilitators of their own success, and that they must actively pursue their ambitions through hard work, dedication, and perseverance. Parents send their children to live in unfamiliar places with unfamiliar people with the hopes that they will learn to adjust to their surroundings, fulfill their obligations, and formulate plans for their future. Harsh treatment is necessary because it simulates the experiences of those who do not work hard: They are poor, they are hungry, and they are irrevocably dependent on others. The goal of fostering in this case is to encourage young people to take control of their futures.

Space and Modernity: The Myth of the Timeless, Isolated Village

In the anthropological literature there is sometimes a tendency to essentialize children living in third world countries as isolated and with limited exposure to the outside world. Such a portrayal of youth in Africa obscures their role as social mediators of change. Throughout his book *The Anthropology of Childhood: Cherubs, Chattel and Changelings*, Michael Lancy distinguishes between “modern children” and “children of the village” when discussing the activities of young people and how they are experienced differently in the two contexts. In a similar vein Robert LeVine compares “village children” (1994) with those of the West as if the two categories are neatly bounded at opposite ends of the spectrum of experiences and life

circumstances. This dichotomy is problematic because it homogenizes rural villages and it assumes that all children living in Western countries are equally affluent and subject to the same opportunities. I suggest that both groups are equally “modernized” in that both are a product of historical and geographical circumstances that are heavily influenced by internal and external events, policies, industries, and relationships.

Just as we need to move away from the visual representations of African children mentioned above in the media, it is similarly necessary to transcend the representations of them in scholarly writing as isolated and unchanging as the village model does. As Charles Piot (1999) argues in his book *Remotely Global: Village Modernity in West Africa*, everything that could be considered “most unEuropean” (21) and “traditionally African” is a product of Africans’ interactions with each other and the rest of the world – particularly with the colonial powers over the past 300 years. Even in small and isolated villages society is constantly transforming over time, and these societies are affected by outside influences and changes in the global landscape. I see youth as mediators of social change who employ agency through their active participation in politics, popular culture, and the economy (see Piot 1999). As Durham (2000) argues, because changing economies affect the activities and prospects of young people and have the potential to redirect and dislocate their ambitions, they are particularly sensitive to these transformations and they are therefore actively engaged in the politics that influence them.

I believe that the contrast of “village” children set against that of “modern” youth perpetuates the myth of African children as passive and at the mercy of those in power, as well

as the idea that the concept of “modernity” is rooted in place. Piot argues that it is the relationship between urban and rural settings as well as between first, second, and third world countries that places all people and places that exist in the modern world under the realm of modernity. By recognizing the potential of youth in Africa to make powerful changes in their social environments we can transcend such outdated and misleading representations of African children in the anthropological literature.

Cultural Abandonment?: Migration and Cosmopolitanism in Guinea Bissau

Africa is a place where labor migration has existed as an “enduring feature of the political economy” (Hart 1982) as long as there has been capitalism in Europe and the Americas. Among the first migrants of the region were Manjaco men of Guinea Bissau, and they (along with an increasing number of young Manjaco women) remain active in such movements of people today. Throughout the 20th century they have worked as stevedores, as agricultural workers, as household helpers, and as prostitutes. They have traveled as far as Spain, Portugal, and France to work as street sweepers, house painters, and public toilet cleaners. Thus, over the past 120 years or so migration labor has been a fundamental aspect of Manjaco culture, however inclusion in the “world of millennial capitalism” (Gable 2006:388) has also led to an association of the Manjaco young adult with notions of cosmopolitanism, and in some instances they are accused of cultural abandonment (Gable 2000) by village elders. In what follows I will provide a case study of how agency is expressed through mobility by young people in Guinea Bissau, who sometimes feel that in order to better their life prospects, they

must leave their homes either temporarily or indefinitely to follow opportunities and secure consistent employment in more urbanized settings.

In recent years Manjaco youth have begun to use funerals as a medium of expression of individuality and freedom of movement. They use an undeniably “traditional” ceremony to demonstrate that cosmopolitanism is a means of self expression both at home and abroad, and that because labor migration has played such a significant role in Manjaco culture over the past several generations, they conceive it to be under the realm of “tradition” rather than “modernity” (Gable 2006). Because so many Manjacos have migrated to other parts of the region of West Africa such as to Dakar, or to European countries, a significantly larger number of Manjacos now live abroad than in Guinea Bissau, and the result is that there have been much more funerals in recent decades than bodies to bury. These funerals are often quite lavish because Manjacos who live abroad will pay for them as a means of signaling their commitment to home and to their families.

Despite the regularity of emigrants returning home after death symbolically rather than physically, this practice was not always so common or nearly as tolerated. During colonial times it became very difficult to travel with corpses across borders because of hygiene policies, although every effort was often made to circumvent these laws. However, as borders became more heavily patrolled and as Manjacos began to migrate further and further away from home, cultural practices were modified to accommodate these circumstances. It became acceptable to substitute corpses with symbolic changelings: A head shaped bundle and a funeral cloth are draped over a “vaguely corporeal” (Gable 2006: 390) shaped object. Thus individuals who have

long since left the community are still considered to be full members of the group and their deaths are treated as such,

Long-distance death continues to be treated as if it were local and tactile. As a result, although home village populations have declined by more than half in the last 50 years, household ancestor shrines are packed. Houses look like mausoleums. Empty of the living, Manjaco houses are full of the dead. Death has become a kind of repatriation (Gable 2006:390).

When a family member perishes abroad people prepare for a funeral in the same ways in which they would if a body were present: cattle, palm wine and rum are purchased for consumption at the ceremony, religious sacrifices are made and the undertaker is even compensated despite the absence of a body to be interred in the family tomb. Finally, the space of the ceremony becomes transformed into a “theater of cosmopolitan accomplishments” (390). These accomplishments are enacted and embodied and the funeral becomes a place in which the tension between individuality and “corporate sociality” (Gable 2006:391) is celebrated.

Despite the regularity of out migration in this culture, and despite the fact that emigrants contribute substantially to their home communities, people often speak of their relatives who have emigrated in bitter and denigrating ways. In fact, the faceless relative who has run off to Paris or Dakar in a selfish quest for better prospects is the favored scapegoat of the elders who commonly attribute the crumbling landscape to the lack of availability of the labor of young men to build dykes and cultivate the rice fields. Although traditional ceremonies and rites of passage are commonly funded by emigrants, they are simultaneously blamed for the crumbling sense of community on which villages had depended in the past.

I believe that the transformation of the funeral ceremony by Manjaco young people is an example of how youth can influence local attitudes towards emigration and other aspects of their culture that are currently being transformed. By celebrating the accomplishments the deceased individual had while abroad, and by focusing on the positive aspects of his or her absence, youth are shifting perceptions from emigration as a form of cultural abandonment to a form of cultural enrichment. It is true that fewer men are available for farming and agricultural work in recent years, however, they are finding prosperity in other places and they are sharing their good fortune with their families who remain at home.

The criticism that emigrants often become subjected to, according to Gable, becomes an example of the counter-modern or counter-capitalist attitudes of many contemporary social anthropologists who have worked in Africa. In such critiques, “the village often becomes the metaphor of choice for Africa as a whole and in which agents of the village’s ruin are the usual impersonal subjects” (2008:404). Thus, the Manjaco youth who runs off to a more exciting and personally fulfilling life in the city becomes the ultimate destructor of culture, tradition, and familial and social obligation. The Manjaco elders thus oppose the cosmopolitan to the local as they oppose selfish to virtuous, however as Gable has demonstrated, such a position ignores the long history of emigration and movements of people in West Africa, many of which antedated colonial rule, neoliberalism, and other events that have supposedly driven the young rural man to abandon his family and escape to the glittering city. The idea that modernity is soiling the purity of the village and corrupting the morale of tradition essentializes the African village. Such a position ignores the political agency of Africans and obscures their participation in the global world.

Repairing the Social Landscape and Preparing for the Future: “The Development of Culture Club”

In the village of Katama, young Manjaco men wanted to convince elders to listen to their ideas and compromise on traditions that limit the power of young people in the late 1980s and early 90s. They did so by establishing “The Development of Culture Club” (Gable 2000). The goal of the club was to repair recent history and the damaged social landscape of Katama—both of which were legacies of colonial rule. They also wished to convince the elders that emigration was a means of pursuing economic opportunity and not cultural abandonment. Furthermore, by re-establishing relationships with other villages in the region, members of “The Development of Culture Club” hoped to reclaim the peaceful relations which had been shattered by conflicts brought on by colonial rule (Gable 2000). Through small but meaningful gestures such as demanding that all men drink wine together rather than the young men only partaking after the elders had finished, the youth of “The Club” established a voice for themselves in the community. Instances such as this can be perceived as “the young rebel against tradition by lashing out the old” (Gable 2000:195) which is accompanied by a sense of loss or destruction, and may even be seen as a cultural collapse. The young members of “The Club” saw themselves as acting for the good of the community and they saw themselves as doing so through the precedent of tradition because they were actively involved in what they called “making society” (2000:196). Gable criticizes Africanist discourses that equate social stability with the authority of the elders in traditional rural Africa. I believe that the role of youth in the imagination of both insiders and outsiders of rural African communities becomes that of the angered, troubled, and rebellious mob in need of containment mentioned

previously. Such perceptions obscure the potential of youth not only to pave the way for better prospects in the future, but also as repairers of the past. Such efforts were at the core of the development of “The Culture Club” in Katama as residents were referring to the recent history as leaving the land “broken”.

Prior to independence in the 1960s roughly 600 people lived and cultivated rice fields in the area, but many people fled as the revolution for independence created violent confrontations and tenuous relationships with other nearby villages. After independence was achieved in 1974 the region was further desecrated by a prolonged drought that lasted until 1985. During this time period young people began to gravitate out of the region and in to urban centers such as Dakar where they could find work and send money home to their relatives still trying to survive in their parched village. As the rice fields crumbled because there were not enough men to maintain them, scrub forest took over lands that had once been inhabited. Whereas the young people saw emigration as a means of saving their families from poverty and starvation, the older generation perceived their plight as an escape to more exciting surroundings. As stated above, emigration had always been a significant aspect of Manjaco life, even before colonialism, the struggle for independence, and the long and unforgiving drought had come along. In the past such quests were perceived less as a means of youthful adventure, and more so as a form of escaping economic misery at home in order to find prosperity abroad. In the mid-nineteenth century young men traveled to Senegal and the Gambia to farm peanuts for cash, and thousands more followed in the early 20th century to gather rubber when the crop boomed and demand for it was high. By 1950 roughly a third of Manjaco young men and women were “across the river” in Senegal (Gable 2000). But despite

the fact that labor migration had always been a fact of village life, it took on the form of a “destructive hemorrhage” (2000:196) in recent years as young people began to leave and return home only when they had lost a job or needed to eat, or when they were eager to show off their urbanity. Such performances of cosmopolitanism pressured youth to keep up with their peers and led them to either abandon the village or to become irrevocably envious of their more prosperous and sophisticated friends. These feelings exacerbated the growing rift between emigrants and those who stayed at home in the village. Repairing the “broken” land became the stated goal of “The Development of Culture Club” and the founding members set off to do this in two ways: they protected and promoted aspects of Manjaco culture such as dance and cooperative labor, and they actively tried to eradicate those elements they found to be destructive, including accusations of witchcraft and sacrifice. These efforts are not, as some anthropologists would argue, methods of destructing culture but rather they are examples of transforming culture. One of the main projects of the “The Club” was to bring back the cultural practice of cooperative labor and they did this by organizing village work parties to harvest and plow the fields of the elders. They also planted and harvested a bean field and sold the beans at a lower-than-market rate to village mothers who then had a small source of seedlings to use in their own gardens. Any money that “The Club” made was used to organize and fund parties and other social gatherings for young people in the area, and to purchase books and supplies for those who were attending school. As community needs were served the intergenerational antagonism began to recede and the elders began to recognize that the club was in place in order to preserve the cooperative lifestyle of the community, and not to destroy it or encourage selfish behavior. Although emigration was still sometimes perceived as youthful

adventure and a means of escaping obligations at home, the elders accepted that “The Culture Club” was in place to foster youthful productivity as well as innovation and cooperation.

Claiming Spaces: Street ‘Bases’ and Youth Clubs in Urban Ghana

In recent decades major changes in the political economy have led to the marginalization of young men in Accra, Ghana. The traditional markers of adult masculinity are paid employment and the role of breadwinner in this setting; however, job opportunities have changed dramatically as have those of higher education and university enrollment. Much of the research on young men across the African continent has focused on their participation in warfare or their use of violence to gain power and influence. As Weiss (2004) has argued young men in Africa tend to be portrayed as either “emasculated dependents” or as “disruptive villains destroying the social order” (Langevang 2008:227). While it is true that some young men have been driven into illicit or illegal activities in order to survive or make money in West Africa, the same can be said about all regions in the world where economic disparities have left their mark on emerging generations.

Most young men who are coming of age in the city of Accra, Ghana find it incredibly difficult to find consistent paid employment, and many are still living at home and entirely dependent on their parents when they are of an age where they should be getting married and establishing their own households. Not wanting to sit at home feeling useless and burdensome to their working mothers, many young men have begun to congregate in the streets and public places, and some of these areas have been claimed as “bases”, which are becoming “important features of the contemporary urban landscape” (Langevang 2008:227). Although these men

are more often than not, simply passing the time in conversation with their peers, they are commonly associated with mischief and possible gang activity. In this section I will discuss the act of “place making” among urban youth in Ghana and how social perceptions of an ambiguous age bracket are complicated and contested when its members and the space they occupy become mapped onto public spaces such as street corners and barbershops.

As discussed in the opening section of this thesis, the concept of youth is best understood as one that “shifts” or is renegotiated and reconfigured across generations as both the local and global landscapes transform over time. Skelton (2000) has argued, the ambiguous position of youth somewhere between or within the childhood/adulthood social binary, leads to suspicion and unease. When this nervous predisposition becomes mapped onto the public/private social binary, “the anxiety seems to double” (Langevang 2008:228). The presence of groups of idle young people on the street are perceived as a threat to the social order as unruly gangs have participated in criminal activity, and violence and intimidation in the past. But to the young men who congregate daily at various “bases” throughout the city, the street and other public spaces are important venues for asserting, contesting, and negotiating youth identities (Langevang 2008).

In the 1970s, the Center of Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham began a series of systematic studies that examined youth subcultures in Britain. The model of subculture deviance became the favored method of understanding the “stylistic responses of working class youth” (Langevang 2008:228). It was at this moment that research began to negate or even ignore the mundane experiences of youth who did not show deviant

behavior or participate in oppositional youth cultures in the Global North and South alike. It seemed as though the media and academia were only interested in gang activity, crime, and destructive acts of rebellion. The forgotten youth who did not engage in such activities were not only lumped in with those that did, but they were also left to “face an enormous range of social, cultural, educational and financial pressures” (Valentine et al 1998: 24) with little support or attention from either local or global powers.

This emphasis on the marginality of youth, and ideas of a lost generation or a youth crisis, have led to an interest in their agency, or how they create viable pathways, meaningful social spaces, and new forms of associations (Langevang 2008). Young men who are perceived as a problem or even a danger to society do not hold on to their marginalization passively, but rather they actively demonstrate “tremendous creativity” (deBoeck and Honwana 2005:2) in making a living for themselves in the face of social instability and endemic conflict.

The control and claiming of spaces is directly tied to the construction of identities, and thus space is often utilized as a means of creating new identities or contesting previously existing ones. In the city of Accra young men congregate at various bases which are experienced as “lived space” (Matthews et al 2000:64), where they affirm their sense of difference and celebrate their feelings of belonging. Concurrent with the implementation of structural adjustment programs negotiated by the government, Ghana experienced a rapid urbanization in the mid 1980s. This rapid growth combined with economic insufficiency led to many areas in Accra lacking basic services. The simultaneous removal of subsidies and a drastic decrease in public sector employment led to expensive utility bills, food, and fuel, and

widespread unemployment among city dwellers. In present day urban Ghana there is little hope among young people in finding employment in the formal sector, and thus many have to attempt to make a living through the informal sector. Although the government commonly promotes education as the escape route from underdevelopment, the cost of above-primary level schooling is placed on the young people themselves, as more fees are implemented and previously existing fees have dramatically increased. Furthermore, the market value of a school certificate has decreased significantly in the past decade.

The claiming of spaces in the public arena as bases for groups of marginalized young men are venues wherein they can create meaning and find solidarity with their peers who face the same economic hardship and societal exclusion. According to cultural anthropologist, Thilde Langevang, bases are produced by “the spatial gathering of the bodies of young men” and that they are constituted by “sitting bodies” (2008:232). Members come and go as they please; often arriving if and when they have nothing else to do and leaving when something else comes up. The social bonds between members are enacted through the gestures of coming and going: a newcomer will shake hands with everyone in the group before sitting and joining the conversation, and this will be repeated upon his departure, often with the well-known saying, “I am going and coming,” which indicates that he will return at some uncertain time in the future. While sitting with their peers members of bases will discuss a variety of topics including the pain and anger they feel in regards to their marginalization from the rest of society. However, bases can also be perceived as a means of asserting agency: by claiming public space and producing it as their own, they reclaim dignity as well as personal autonomy.

Not surprisingly, many business owners and residents complain about the presence of bases on their streets because in their view young men sitting around all day doing nothing. Because some bases and the members that are associated with them have been involved in criminal activities, they are becoming synonymous with places where crimes are planned. Langevang speculates, "Hence, from an outsider's point of view, the (non)activity of the bases is viewed at its best as 'an endless waste of time, an absence of purpose' (Corrigan 1976: 103), and at its worst as a threat" (2008:233). But because most base members are unemployed or engaged in irregular work, and because leisure activities are scarce (as well as the money to pay for them), the street is the only place for young men to go when they have nothing else to do. The street becomes a place that is their domain: the marginal place becomes the center of their lives, which is indicated by the clever title of "base", which suggests that these places are starting points or foundations for bigger and better things.

Perhaps most importantly, however, "a base is a place of debate that serves as an important locus for the discursive mediation of change" (Youngstedt 2004:95). Young men find their voices at bases where they have a chance to openly discuss important issues and thus retain some notion of autonomy, and where they can use these lively discussions to make sense of their lives and the changing conditions around them. The young men emphasize the importance of having plans, and they discuss their plans with fellow members who may encourage or criticize them, leading to lively debates. As Langevang articulates, "bases are places for discussions, contestations and negotiations more than they are about finding one common and unified outlook constructed in opposition to outside values" (2008:236). Thus,

although members generally agree on matters regarding how they ended up in their current position, the means of escaping it are widely contested.

Despite the fact that most base members do not have consistent work opportunities, there are material advantages to association with these bases. A sense of community is created among the marginalized youth who frequent bases, and an informal network is fostered in this setting. As stated in a previous section, wealth and security lie much more in people and relationships than in material possessions, and bases are one form practicing this cultural ideal. Because unemployment limits young men's opportunities, and because support from the state and the family are limited, bases are sometimes used as peer-based social support systems. Some groups have developed rotating savings and credit groups wherein participants are expected to contribute a certain amount of money on regular intervals, and the total collection is given to each member in turn. The receiver decides how the money will be spent, but it is commonly put towards school fees, rent, or medication for a sick family member. These exchanges build on more fluid and complex principles of mutual understanding, sympathy, responsibility and obligation. In Ghana friendship is closely linked to material exchanges and respect, and thus one shows respect for a friend through the act of giving. Young men will also use base meetings to exchange information on educational and employment opportunities. Membership means there is always the prospect that employment is just around the corner, or that contact will be established with a patron who may fund education or assist someone in setting up their own business.

In recent years attempts have been made to formalize bases into youth clubs which include democratically elected leaders, rules, and regulations. These clubs hold regular meetings where important issues and ideas are discussed and minutes are documented and kept. The purpose of these youth clubs is “to help brothers to help themselves in the future” (Langeveng 2008:237), and to become involved in community development projects. By organizing neighborhood clean-up parties and by offering communal labor for neighborhood assistance, these men hope to legitimize their associations and alter the public image of young men in their society. Through digging trenches, cleaning gutters, and gathering trash and litter from the streets, these men hope to demonstrate to others that they are responsible citizens who are doing something for the community. Links to other clubs have been formally established and leaders have begun to meet on a routine basis to discuss visions for the neighborhoods, and to coordinate activities and football matches between the clubs. They have registered with the urban council and they now plan to meet with authorities to discuss their plans for development.

The marginalized young men of Accra thus created a space for themselves to reassert their agency and autonomy, to establish a social support system, and to discuss and debate their current economic and political exclusion, and how they plan to change it. Although they are still fighting an uphill battle as youth in Ghana are traditionally seen as the “receivers” of ideas and not the “generators”(Langeveng 2008:239), they have managed to create a foundation for their presence on the street. The base is not a means of fostering idleness or lazy behavior, but rather it is an arena in which avenues of change are discussed, and where economic and social exclusion are battled and renegotiated.

Chapter 4, Conclusion

“Stop the Pity. Unlock the Potential”: Breaking Free of Stereotypes and Misrepresentations

The need for a new set of representations is expressed by the non-profit organization, *Mama Hope*, which funds projects to build self-sufficient communities across sub-Saharan Africa. By partnering with community-based organizations *Mama Hope* aims to meet fundamental needs for food, clean water, education, and health. The organization invests in high impact, cost-effective projects that aim to meet community needs for clean water, food, education, and health care. *Mama Hope* has funded and facilitated the construction of schools in Tanzania and Ghana, a women’s reproductive health center in Uganda, and drip irrigation systems in Kenya. “Stop the pity. Unlock the potential” is the slogan for *Mama Hope’s* latest campaign, which aims to raise awareness about the problematic portrayals of African children in the popular media. *Mama Hope* has an online video series that critiques negative representations of African children. *Mama Hope’s* website states:

We've had enough of the tragic impressions of Africans that flood the media and nonprofit campaigns. We aim to break these stereotypes by releasing a series of captivating videos that show the light of the people we serve in Africa. We aspire to introduce our communities to you with the integrity and brilliance that we witness every day (<http://www.mamahope.org/index.html>).

The first video introduces Alex, a nine-year-old boy from Tanzania who excitedly describes the plot of the 1989 Arnold Schwarzenegger movie, *Commando*. Alex appears healthy and well taken care of and as he reenacts action-packed shootout scenes from his current favorite film, viewers can see that he is intelligent, happy, and charismatic. He is not emaciated, his clothes are in good condition, and he stands in front of his well-maintained

house and small motorcycle. As Alex speaks into the camera, descriptions pop up on the screen beside his smiling face: “Alex is not a child soldier”, “Alex is not an orphan”, and “Alex is not a victim of AIDS”. As the video is drawing to a close the descriptions turn to what Alex is: “Alex is bright”, “Alex is hopeful”, “Alex is bilingual”, and “Alex is athletic”.

Mama Hope criticizes other non-profits that appeal to donors by spreading war, genocide, and AIDS epidemic images of African. While these portrayals of Africa children effectively bring in cash donations, they simultaneously perpetuate the myth that people in Africa are powerless, pitiful, and completely lost without external aid. *Mama Hope* stresses the importance of “re-humanizing Africa” by focusing on the positive changes that have been made in recent years. The videos highlight the similarities between Africans and other peoples and by doing so *Mama Hope* aims to break negative perceptions of African children.

Alex’s video is powerful in that it reveals so much about children in Africa that is surprising on the one hand, but really shouldn’t be on the other. Alex is not a victim, and he is also not a monster. He represents the millions of children that exist outside those parameters, yet remain invisible to the eyes of the outside world. The fact that this video campaign is meant to shock viewers who expect African children to be either pathetic and suffering or angry and intimidating suggests that the children who don’t fit these extremes are deliberately left out of popular representations, especially the media. Because so much of the aid that is funneled into the continent depends on the continued support of individual donors and donor agencies alike, it is a short leap to the possibility that these misrepresentations are not an

accident. Pictures and images are powerful because they provoke an emotional response that can be quickly generated into a charitable donation.

I suggest that *Mama Hope* indicates that pitiful imagery does more harm than good for African children because such imagery perpetuates the myth that African children are entirely dependent on donors and aid for the most basic life necessities. From here it is but a short leap to the misconception that people in Africa have no power or agency, and that they passively accept their fate. Depictions of African children as pathetic, hungry and hopeless little creatures obscures their potential and perpetuates the myth that they are entirely dependent on aid for survival, or that they are victims of those in power. According to *Mama Hope*, “Too many non-profits ask for your pity by depicting poor, helpless Africans. But like any stereotype, this portrayal has more exceptions than truth” (<http://www.mamahope.org/index.html>). Not all children in Africa are victims of war, genocide, and AIDS, and although they may sometimes benefit from the assistance of NGOs, non-profits, charities, and missionary projects, they are not dependent on them, and they are anything but powerless.

Deborah Durham believes that youth in Africa “stand at the center of the dynamic imagination of the African social landscape” (2000:114), and they are thus situated as mediators of social change. Anthropologists have not neglected youth in African ethnographies, however, they are “too often featured in a supporting role” (2000:114). Future anthropological inquires that focus on youth’s potential in Africa are needed to combat the negative imagery that has overwhelmed the social imagination of children in Africa. I suggest that young people across the Africa continent are working to change the social and political

landscape in creative and innovative ways. They rebel, they plan, they come together and collaborate, they push boundaries, and they absolutely refuse to be silenced.

No Need for Child Labor Laws: Work *Is* Education

Children in Africa are significant contributors to household labor; however this does not compromise their ability to get an education. Rather, work is education and it prepares children for adulthood. The neontocracy/gerontocracy dichotomy helps us understand why work is considered beneficial to growth and development in some contexts, and detrimental or destructive in others. However, I would suggest that the two are not mutually exclusive in that societies commonly express aspects of both: children in Africa spend much of their time engaged in work rather than play, but this is considered a necessary component of their proper upbringing. An opportunity to learn is an act of *giving* in this region because it equips children with the knowledge and skills of being a successful, productive adult. Children's labor is thus exchanged for their preparation for adulthood. Furthermore, expecting something in return from one's children does not preclude one from simultaneously idolizing them and providing them with their needs and desires as demonstrated by Beng mothers in Côte d' Ivoire.

Apprentices are required to contribute years of dedicated service and labor in exchange for their training in a craft or specialty occupation. This form of learning is unique because it is separated from teaching: pupils absorb knowledge through observation and imitation and verbal instruction is rare. Thus, the student is the facilitator of his education because his advancement depends on his ability to pay close attention to the activities of his master, as well as his willingness to submit to his demands and respect his authority. Cameroonian wood

carvers who have been denied apprenticeship opportunities bypass the practice by using embodied cognition: their bodies become their teachers because they must learn the craft through their own practice, and they must use what they learn along the way to develop technique. Furthermore, by working to expand the market for wood carved objects they have created an audience of consumers for their products by manufacturing objects that represent nationalism and modernity rather than tradition and the exclusive palace hierarchy.

Freedom of Movement: Agency Expressed Through Mobility

Child fostering is one way of expressing the value of relationships in African communities. It is a means of carefully balancing labor and resources across households in a given extended family or lineage, but also it acts to cement ties between these household units which may be distributed across large geographic spaces. The experience of living in another household not only provides children with multiple caregivers who are invested in their survival and success, but it also produces a unique situation in which children are taught to take control of their circumstances. Hawa from Kumasi hated being separated from her father and her siblings through her fostering, but she then grows up to become a self-sufficient independent woman. Mende teenagers are subjected to a period of harsh treatment in order to prepare them for the challenges of adulthood, and to communicate to them that they are the ultimate facilitators of their own success. They learn that diligence and hard work lead to comfortable lives, and that laziness or idleness leads to poverty and dependence on others.

Manjaco youth of Guinea Bissau take on the challenge of changing the local perceptions on emigration by reformatting the traditional funeral ceremony into a celebration of the

accomplishments that are achieved abroad. They argue that emigration has existed in Manjaco culture for generations and that it is not a form of cultural abandonment, but rather cultural enrichment. Even though young emigrants are criticized for their display of cosmopolitanism, they are also responsible for supporting their families back home, and they are remarkably conscious and respectful of this responsibility. Youth who remain at home have actively taken on projects that focus on repairing the past and preparing young people for the future through the creation of “The Development of Culture Club” (Gable 2000). They are bringing back group labor parties to help elderly people maintain their agricultural fields, they are re-establishing the ties with neighboring villages that were severed during colonialism, and they are encouraging younger children to pursue education by providing them with books and supplies, and paying their school fees when they can.

Similarly, young men in Accra, Ghana who feel marginalized and excluded from society as changes in the economy have drastically affected unemployment and university enrollment, are attempting to claim the space of the street as a venue for discussing plans for neighborhood development. The formalization of these spaces as youth clubs act as a social support system for members, and share a goal in bettering the prospects for education and employment for future generations. I suggest that bases and youth clubs in Ghana and “The Development of Culture Club” in Guinea Bissau are representations of Durham’s claim that youth are mediators of social change, and that they are actively engaged in the political and social transformations that are currently taking place across Africa.

The Role of Anthropologists: Youth as “Central Figures”

I believe that future anthropological inquiries ought to focus on these and other instances of youth in Africa using their experiences and surroundings as a springboard for action and transformation. By shifting the focus from pitiful, destructive, and dependent in the media to powerful, innovative, and inspiring in anthropological narratives, we can move past outdated and potentially detrimental stereotypes regarding what it means to be a young person growing up in Africa. It is crucial for anthropologists to make youth the “central figures” (Durham 2000: 114) of their inquiries in order to adequately recognize them as powerful and provocative social and political actors. If we are to “stop the pity” and “unlock the potential” of young Africans, we must reject the imagery and rhetoric that continues to condemn them in essentialized categories. Representations of youth as passive, as victimized, as dangerous, or as isolated and unaffected by the wider global world irrevocably arrests them in our imagination. We must look past the dirt and skinny limbs in order to see their energy and their intelligence. Anthropologists must move past stories of child soldiering and gang activity and instead focus on their political activism and the steps they are taking to create a better future for themselves and for their children. I agree with the creators of *Mama Hope* in that the first step in unlocking the potential of youth in Africa is to shed them of the shackles of representations that have precluded us from perceiving them as active social shifters in the past.

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