

Changes in the concept of Childhood: Implications on Children in Ghana

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Abstract

The concept of childhood continues to undergo tremendous transformation especially in Africa and particular in Ghana. Some of the most influential factors responsible for this change among other things include economic, socio-cultural and political dynamics. This paper examines the traditional concept of childhood in Africa in general and particularly in Ghana, the factors that have affected the transformations, and its implications on children. I conclude that these changes have redefined what childhood is in Ghana, and thus have negatively impacted the society's obligations to its children.

Key Words: childhood, implication, Ghana

Introduction

Children of today indisputably are the custodians of tomorrow's world. The continuous existence of any society depends on the ability of the society to socialize its children in the art of survival and cultural perpetuation. The future of any society is determined by the quality of its children and the level of commitment towards the protection of its most vulnerable members, the young and the old. Africans as a people have triumphed against adversities and obstacles to maintain and perpetuate their culture through rigorous socialization techniques, which involves the inputs of all community members. The long tale of Africa's survival against the onslaught of political, economic and social domination by other cultures has been the secret of its community organization strategies. Most communities in Africa have survived because of their ability to form organic communal bonds, which seeks to protect each and every member of the society.

Unfortunately, the above painted picture of Africa is a faded version in contemporary times. Africa has undergone tremendous transformations since its contact with Europeans, and other foreign cultural elements. Africa emerged from this contact with a bruised cultural identity and the philosophy of the oppressed. Although this paper is not a historical assessment of Africa's contact with dominant cultural elements, an understanding of the genesis of Africa's problems is essential in providing a better appreciation of how the social structure of Africa functions vis-à-vis its children.

This paper examines the changing roles of children and perception of childhood in Ghana specifically and Africa in general. Although the problems of Ghana have some uniqueness, it is synonymous with the wider problems of the African continent. I will address the concept of childhood through child-rearing practices in Ghana by drawing on examples from other African countries. I also provide the historical evolution of the concept of childhood and how they are applicable to the situations in Ghana and Africa. Furthermore, I will address the factors that have influenced the changes in the roles of children and their providers, and how that affects the concept of childhood in Ghana and Africa in general. I must emphasize that due to the paucity of research on the concept of childhood in Ghana specifically, I will rely on examples from other Africa countries and my own personal insights as a member of the cultural context of Ghana. By the end of the discussions in this paper we should be in the position to conclude whether childhood is or not in extinction in Ghana and for that matter Africa as a whole. After assessing the holistic situation of childhood and child-rearing practices in Ghana and Africa, I will introduce some theoretical insights to explicate my position within this paper.

Conceptualization and History of Childhood, Childhood, and Child Rearing Practices in Africa

Childhood in contemporary times has become a contentious concept because of the political claims of culture and the notion of identity. Most importantly, the debate on children has intensified as a result of the

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increasing rate of globalization and the changing roles of children within the socio-cultural and political construct of modern societies. Modern global trends have affected many indigenous societies, transforming tremendously the social structure and institutions of these societies. Particularly in Africa, exogenous disruptions have accounted for most of the socio-cultural and political evolutions that have taken place. Severely affected were social institutions which inherently possessed the coded prescriptions for human interaction and development. Institutions governing human interactions are the most essential component of the cultural makeup of all human societies. The existence of these institutions is the foundation upon which the survival of the society rests. Thus, any serious disruptions could endanger the very existence of the people. In Africa, one of the most severely affected is the socialization/education institution. Intertwined with socialization/education institution is the concept of childhood and child rearing practices.

To fully understand the evolutionary processes of childhood in Africa, an understanding of the concept of childhood is essential. It will entail answers to the questions of what is childhood, the construction of childhood and the historical evolution of childhood as a concept. I will start this discussion from a universal perspective of childhood. This will provide the basis for my analysis on the African perspective of childhood.

There is difficulty in understanding and conceptualizing childhood. Jenks (1996) for instance posits that:

After centuries of debate and practice, we have still not achieved any consensus over the issue of childhood. Despite a long cultural commitment to the good of the child, and more recent intellectual engagement with the topic of childhood, what remains perpetually diffuse and ambiguous is the basic conceptualization of childhood as a social practice (p.2).

Although children have also been part of man's society, very little is known about children. Mead & Wolfenstein (1954) asserts that "Although each historic period of which we have any record has had its own version of childhood...childhood was still something one took for granted, a figure of speech, a mythological subject rather than a subject of articulate scrutiny" (p.3).

Thus, childhood should be understood within a cultural and social context. The social impetus of childhood should not be relegated to the realms of just a natural state. Children are social beings whose world is constructed within a historical and a cultural frame of reference. An attempt to universalize the concept of the child leads not only to a misunderstanding of the world of children, but also tantamount to interpretational fallacies. Jenks (1996) states that "childhood is not a brief physical inhibition of a Lilliputian world owned and ruled by others, childhood is rather a historical and cultural experience and its meaning, its interpretations and its interests reside within such contexts" (p.61).

An important approach to the conceptualization of childhood is provided by Qvortrup (1994) who outlines the assumptions underlying the structural approach to understanding childhood. First, Qvortrup (1994) maintains that childhood is both a period in which children function as human and social beings and also as a category of a social class. Childhood transcends beyond the notion of just a period in children's lives, but should be perceived as part of the social construct of every society. Advancing his arguments for a structural interpretation to childhood, Qvortrup further claims that childhood is an integral part of any society. Children affect and are also affected by the changes that occur in their society. Changes in the social structure of any society have a profound impact on the children in the society. For example, changes in the economic institution of many indigenous societies have invariably affected the economic roles of children. Children were considered as economic assets for a family, thus it was an economic incentive to have many children. In Africa particularly, a man's wealth included his children. In modern money income, within the context of traditional African family system, children have become an economic and social liability for their families. In essence, the concept of childhood is intertwined with many other factors of structural significance in a society. In furtherance of the argument for the structural conceptualization of childhood, Qvortrup argues that children are part of the construction mechanism of childhood and society. Qvortrup points to the usefulness of children in society, but the nature and the context of their usefulness has undergone some changes. In spite of these changes, children and adults are both active participants in the construction of social realities in every society.

Scheper-Hughes & Sargent (1998), also maintain that childhood integrates both a biological and a social process. They state that childhood,

...plays a central role in the organization of production and consumption within the home and in the transmission of genes, ideas, identities and property. Outside the home childhood is the primary site of pedagogy and cultural learning. It is the primary nexus of mediation between public norms and private life (p.1).

Childhood embodies the cultural signifiers of identity, social order, and morality, which form the basis of the social fabric of all societies. Childhood, Scheper-Hughes & Sargent (1998), contends, "represents a cluster of discourses and practices surrounding sexuality and reproduction, love and protection, power and authority and their potential abuses" (p.2). So far in the discourse, I have tried to synergize the various perspectives from which childhood can be conceptualized. Although this is not an exhaustive analysis, it provides the framework within which childhood in the cultural context of Africa can be placed. Before I attempt to examine childhood from the African context, I will discuss the historical evolution of childhood using a Euro-American conjecture.

Aries (1962) provides the first intellectual inquest into the genesis of childhood. Aries (1962) provides a chronological pattern of images and perceptions of the child through the cultural experiences of the period from the middle ages. As a historian and influenced by materials from his native country, France, Aries (1962) contends that children historically were invisible beings. He asserts that:

In the medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist; this is not to suggest that children were neglected, forsaken or despised. The idea of childhood is not to be confused with affection for children: it corresponds to awareness of the particular nature of childhood, that particular nature which distinguishes the child from the adult, even the young adult. In medieval society this weakness was a slackness. That is why, as soon as the child could live without the constant solicitude of the mother, his nanny or his cradle-rocker, he belonged to the adult society (p.125).

Aries (1962) further contends that children were perceived as not being different from anyone else. During the middle ages, the status of a person was not established by age or physical maturation. Aries acknowledged the society's recognition of children, but postulates that their relationship with adults underwent tremendous transformations through the passage of time. Aries maintains that it is erroneous to assert that the perception of society about children has been the same. Using evidence from the works of art, Aries asserts that whereas the ancient society had some understanding of childhood, the medieval period had negligible recognition for children. Children after a certain stage were considered as miniature adults. There were no transitions for the children in the form of education programs or initiation rites.

The concept of the child as it exists today began to crystallize around the 17th and the 18th centuries. This is the period the child was evolving from a state of invisibility to the center-stage. Training and other support systems began to compensate for the perceived fragility of the child. This period also witnessed the rise of sacred responsibility of the parents towards their children through the teaching of religious moral and spiritual responsibility. The role of the family also underwent a tremendous transformation. The family was no longer a medium for the transmission of name and property, but became an institution for the upliftment of the moral and spiritual fabric of its members. Aries (1962) also highlights the relationship between class and family. Aries further posits that for many centuries, the differences among different families were blurred. Children irrespective of their class affiliations played the same game. However, modernization changed these dynamics prescribing societal functions and access to resources along the lines of class and later race and gender. Aries however points out that the realization of childhood and its associated luxuries initially was the preserve of the upper class in the society, these luxuries and protections accorded to children later spread through the whole society irrespective of class. Although the author draws mostly from French materials, its general applicability to the situation in Europe is less contentious. However, any attempt to generalize these assertions beyond the boundaries of Europe is bound to encounter severe inaccuracies and fallacious historical and cultural assumptions. For instance, his claim of the concept of childhood as a European peculiarity is erroneous and academically contestable. In spite of the shortcomings, Aries places the chronological transformation of childhood from a period of darkness to the period of light. Aries historical analysis provides

an important insight into childhood conceptualization and rearing practices, not only in historic times, but a modern reference.

Another historical perspective of childhood is advanced by DeMause (1976). Using the psychogenic theory of history, which he developed, DeMause in Jenks (1996) states that:

The history of childhood is a nightmare from which we have only recently begun to awake...The further back in history one goes, the lower the level of child care and the more likely children are to be killed, abandoned, beaten, terrorized and sexually abuse (p.67).

Jenks (1996) traces the historical evolutions of childhood using DeMause's typology. It starts with the period of infanticide, where children were used as poison containers. The second stage was the abandoning mode, which began in the Christian era, manifested in the long abandonment of children by their parents. There was a psychological detachment of parents from their children. Abuse and overt child sacrifice practices as it happened in the period of abandonment were discouraged, but ritualistic sacrifices of children continued within this period. The third phase, the ambivalent mode, which started around the 12th century, ended the practice of abandonment, and training manuals for children were introduced. This period also witnessed the crystallization of legal instruments, which prohibited sexual abuse of children. The intrusive mode, which began around the 16th century, witnessed a greater freedom for children. Children were allowed for the first time in history to fashion an identity for themselves. The socialization mode, which characterized the period around the late 18th century, and it also brought greater freedoms for children and innovative rearing practices, also culminated in the concept of socializing children into acceptable societal norms and values. DeMause as cited in Jenks (1996), asserts that punishment of children took a more psychological form than physical punishment, which was the benchmark of previous stages or modes. Mothers were perceived to be caring, and fathers were seen as the providers of the family. The last stage of childhood recognition, which began around the mid 20th century, was the helping mode. The roles of parents changed from socialization agents to helper of children to attain their fullest potentials. The goal here was not to train children to become what their parents wanted them to be, but to provide catalytic services to the realizing of the goals of the child. Parents provided their children with abundance of love and security. Children were provided with the social and political space for their growth and development with very little societal interference. In fact, this period witnessed enormous advancements in child development strategies and progressive legislative protections for the rights of the child. Children became the center-piece of social advance strategies.

It is important to note that these stages or modes did not follow strict chronological dichotomization. Their prevalence within a specific time frame did not mean that the practices were totally extinct, but more dominant ones overshadowed previous characterizations. In fact Jenks (1996) posits that many of these modes exist in contemporary times. Some societies subject children to treatment of infanticide, abandonment, sexual exploitation and abuse, institutionalized systematic elimination of children in cases of civil and ethnic wars, just to mention a few.

Childhood in Africa

With the conceptualization and the historical evolution of the childhood as a concept, how is childhood conceptualized within the African thought? Which of the historical phases does childhood in Africa fit? And how has social and political transformations manifested in the conceptual framework of childhood in Africa? Answers to these questions will not be easy due to paucity of research on the concept of childhood in Africa. Nonetheless, I will use examples of childrearing practices in different cultures in Africa to make intellectual inferences on the concept of childhood. I will also rely on my experiences as a member of the cultural context and the cultural traditions I was exposed to as a child, and my transition to adulthood. To provide a better comparative analysis I will divide Africa into two concepts. The traditional Africa, which is the unadulterated Africa, that is prehistoric Africa, and contemporary Africa, that is Africa after the period of slavery, colonialism, and post independent Africa. In this section, my usage of Africa refers to prehistoric Africa. References to contemporary Africa will be qualified as such.

Africa as a traditional society was perceived as a very dangerous environment. Thus, social patterns were developed around a communal and organic philosophy for protection and survival against adversities. Valentine & Revson (1979), claim that:

The climate, insect, and endemic disease in many areas have all conspired against man's ability to populate the continent...the way of life that evolved was geared to facilitate survival. The society was tightly organized, communal in nature, with kinship systems in extended families whose members made up a network of relationships that carried benefits and obligations to each other (p.457).

Although these assertions are inherently exaggerated, it provides a starting point for our inquest into the cultural milieu from which the child exists. I will briefly define culture. Onwauchi (1972), postulate that culture" is the sum total of the integrated learned behavior patterns characteristic of members of a society. It is the same total of a people's customary way of doing things" (p.241). Culture is a learned process, which is transmitted from one generation to the other. A society continues to exist, if its cultural strategies of survival are impacted into the younger generation. This is the epitome of the importance of the child to the Africa. Onwauchi (1972) maintains that in every society, irrespective of it level of social advancement, every child is born with the innate qualities of mind and body. Children are socialized through the various institutional structures to acquire the cultural behaviors of the society.

Onwauchi (1972) further maintains that:

The indigenous African societies educated their children through the on-going processes of life in their traditional customs and values. Through their traditional tales and myths, the elders teach the children the moral ethical codes of behaviors and social relationship. Through certain religious rituals and practices, communal attainments of spiritual ideas were established. These spiritual ideals lay the foundation for the respect which the indigenous Africans have their political institutions; the love, respect and obedience which the children must show their parents and elders (p.242).

It is important to emphasize that children in traditional Africa were perceived to be human beings in need of help and direction. Childhood in Africa also entailed a spiritual component. In traditional African religion, the belief in reincarnation meant that children were reincarnated people who had lived and died in previous generations. Children were thus not only accorded respect by members of the society, it was also the responsibility of the society to ensure the protection and proper socialization of children. Using the modes promulgated by DeMause, as cited in Jenks (1996), an assertion can be made that childhood in Africa is trapped in period of socializing mode. The Africa child is trained to conform to tenets of the culture. Children are trained to follow the prescribed paths set by the custodians of the culture.

Childhood as a social construction is very relevant within the Africa context. Children are perceived both as biologically vulnerable beings in need of protection and nurturing and at the same time a social construction, which prescribes certain social functions and relationships. Children prescribe the roles that parents play. Fathers are the providers of the family and the mothers provide the needed nurturing for the children. The importance of the child in traditional Africa is their fundamental role as future insurance for their families. As I have stated earlier, children are trained to perpetuate the existence of their family and cultural legacies.

Fortes (1957) writing about the Tallensi in Ghana, divides child development into two stages, the babyhood and childhood. The first stage, the babyhood is the period of birth till about a year's old. Although the baby is in the absolute care of the mother, the responsibility of care for the baby is that of the whole household, including older brothers and sisters, the mother's co-wives and grandparents. The babies in Tallensi tradition are weaned around the age of three, but are fed exclusively on the mother's breast milk for a whole year. According to Fortes (1957), the first development stage is marked by the completion of weaning. This is the period when the child is physically and psychologically severed from its mother. After the child is weaned, the Tallensi children often follow their older siblings, playing and communicating his/her feelings verbally. This increased freedom of the child does not relegate the position of the mother as the center of the universe for the child. For girls, the reference of the mother as the center of the universe remains until marriage, but ends sooner for boys, who must be attached to the trades of their fathers. For the Tallensi child,

although the primary distinction and recognition exist for the biological parents, such distinctions are blurred with the wider household all adults in the household are referred to as 'mothers' and 'father'.

The next period in the development in the Tale child is the period of childhood. This is between the ages of 4-8 years, and its the happiest and freest of the child's life (Fortes, 1957). The child begins to participate in the daily events in the community through observation and mimicking of such activities. Parents begin to instill discipline and exert some authority over the children. Fortes (1957) claims that:

Until it (the child) reaches the threshold of adolescence, at about 12 to 14 years of age, it still remains free to play for much of its time. But from the age of 7 or so boys and girls are eager to participate in the adult routine of life and they become more and more involved in it. They begin by being given the simplest economic and household tasks (p.190).

Division of labor begins to manifest during this period. Boys are generally trained to engage in the manual aspect of the labor process, while girls follow their mothers in their occupational duties. Although the Tale child is allowed some latitude in value conformation up until the age of 5 years, the period between the ages of 8 and 9 is considered the period in which the child has acquired some sense. Conformation to the values and norms of the community is expected from the children.

Another important conceptualization of childhood and rearing practices is through the concept of lineage in Africa. There are two main lineages in Africa, the matrilineage and the patrilineage. The lineage in which a child is born has two important significances. First, it determines which household the child will spend the greater part of his childhood, in matrilineal societies, childhood training, and apprenticeship exists mainly in a matrilineal context. The reverse is the truism in patrilineal societies where rearing and training practices are conducted within the patrilineal context. The second is how

inheritance is arranged. In a matrilineal culture, one can only inherit from the maternal side of the family. For example a son in a matrilineal society cannot directly inherit the father, but can contest for an inheritance from the brothers of the mother. However, inheritance in a patrilineal society holds that children of the father are the direct beneficiaries of the property(s) of their father. This is interesting because, when it comes to child rearing the role of the mothers are uncontested. However, when the child is between the ages of 7-9 years, their maternal uncles train boys from matrilineal societies, and those from the patrilineal remain under the tutelage of their biological fathers. Whatever the dichotomization of lineage is, the child from the union of a man and woman possesses some important features of both. Particularly from the Akan perspective,¹ the child possesses the *sunsum* that is the spirit of the genitor. The child also possesses the *mogya* (blood) of the mother. It is the possession of the *mogya* of mother by the child that earns him/her lineage. An Akan child ascribes to the *abusua* of the mother and the *sunsum* of the father. The prominence of the matriarch in Akan polity does not diminish the role and importance of the patriarchy in the lives of children. The child within this traditional lineage arrangements is perceived to be sacred and in need of protection, physically and spiritually.

The concept of childhood in Africa is not very different from our earlier discussions. Childhood in African philosophical thought is considered as delicate as holding an egg in one's palm. Holding the egg too tight crushes it; a careless handling of the egg may fall from the palm and be destroyed too. Childhood is a delicate concept in African traditional system, which provides a political and social space for children to develop and perpetuate the cultural legacies of their ancestors.

The concept of childhood in Africa is incomplete without a discussion of the fostering practices. Fostering includes the provision of the needed material and spiritual support for the development of the children. According to Kilbride and Kilbride (1994), sibling interdependence is a significant feature underlying patterns of fostering in Kenya. Writing about the Samia people in Western Kenya, Kilbride and Kilbride (1994) asserts that:

A child born out of wedlock will live with his mother's parents, usually permanently. At the death of one or both parents, a child may move to live with the relatives (uncle, aunt, etc.) after the funeral. A child is

¹ I must emphasize that I am an Akan, by birth, with my mother a Fante and my father an Asante. Thus my assertions are based on my experiences and authority in the traditions and customs of the Akan.

sent to a “more prosperous” relative but will visit his or her parents regularly and will eventually return to live with them. If living alone, one can request a child from a sister to alleviate loneliness or to live in the house while the resident is away at work, on night or periodically absent (p.28).

In traditional African societies, the notion of destitution was non-existent. Every child belonged to a family, a kinship or a community. The rearing of the child was the responsibility of not only the family, but all well-meaning members of the society. As has been opined by Kilbride and Kilbride (1990), the family support system invariably formed a barrier against child abuse and neglect. The support system inherent in the African traditional family system actually reduced the rate of child destitution.

The above analysis seems to suggest that there were no problems within the traditional African family system. However, some evidence suggests that the traditional African family may have been overrated in its potential to be a stabilizing unit and as a protector of children. It has been argued by Kayongo-Male and Onyango (1984) in their discussion on traditional African family system that although the system was fairly stable, there were credible incidences of divorce and abuse. This stemmed from polygynous family systems where co-wives competed for the attention and resources for their children. Children were witnesses to occasional family squabbles between their mothers and among the children. There was jealousy and a scramble for family resources especially from the children.

Factors that have Changed the Position of Children in African Societies

In spite of the internal contradictions inherent in the African traditional system and its capacity to provide and protect its children, the social structure of Africa has undergone tremendous changes. These changes have undermined the ability of the social institutions within African societies to sustain practices and values, which defined children. Changes in the political, economic and the social institution have been the main culprits in the realignment of children within the cultural context of Africa. Among other things, I will discuss the impact of colonialism, education and globalization on the tradition African culture, and how children have ultimately been affected.

There is very little disagreement of the assertion that problems of contemporary Africa are a consequence of the disruptions created by colonialism. Craig (1971) contends that:

One of the keys to understanding the problems of new Africa nations of the twentieth century is the briefness of the period which intervened between the end to their isolation from the modern world and their admission to statehood. As late as the 1800s, most of Africa was still uncharted and free from alien penetration. Then with the rush, that is still astonishing to recall, the white man arrived and within twenty years had carved all of Africa into dependencies of their home governments. The traumatic effects of an advanced industrial civilization upon a primitive tribal society are still having repercussions today (p. 408).

The characterization of colonialism in Africa as a brief period is historically inaccurate. But Craig provides an important starting point for our analysis. Colonialism was a radical break with Africa’s past. This was a period in the history of Africa, where the continent was divided amongst the various imperialist powers in Europe. Imperial Europeans imposed their cultural values through coercive mechanism on indigenous African societies. The process of gross cultural imposition sometimes referred to as cultural terrorism, completely altered the African cultural landscape. The imperialist introduced their foreign social structural system to replace the existing institutions in Africa. Imperial education, which functioned outside the cultural reference of the people, replaced traditional African socialization processes. According to Onwauchi (1972),

Indigenous African societies educated their children through the on-going process of life in their traditional customs and values. Through their traditional tales and myths, the elders teach the children the oral codes of behavior and social relationships....through some form of apprenticeship and cultural participation, children acquired the techniques of communication and making a living, as well as those of the creative expressions within the culture (p. 242).

The pedagogical philosophy in African socialization was informal and had relevance to the existence of the child within the cultural context. However, colonialism introduced radical changes in the socialization

of the African. The informal apprenticeship and direct participation of the children in contributing to their society was substituted with a formal regimental curriculum education based on the cultural values of the colonizer. Onwauchi (1972) intimates there were disengagements between colonial education and the lives of the children in their natural environment. He posits, "The typical African child is often faced with many unusual problems of cultural conflict when he goes to formal, schematized school. This conflict is due essentially to the existing discontinuity between the school environment and the home environment" (p.243). Colonialism redefined the relationship between the child and the community. The relevance of the family and the community as socialization agents was replaced by the surrogate imperial education system, which did not value the relevance of the people's culture.

The education or the socialization institution was not the only institution affected by colonialism. The religious institution was affected to the same extent. In most cases, Christianity replaced African traditional religion. A point of interest, there was a synergy between the educational and religious institutions. Christian religious establishments founded most of the early schools established in colonial Africa. Part of the core curriculum in most colonial schools was Christian religious studies. Thus, a child could not be in school without being indoctrinated against his/her native religion. In traditional Africa, family traditions, including the concept of childhood, child-rearing practices were inextricably linked to the religious practices and beliefs. In the Akan tradition specifically religious rituals known as *bragoro*² marked the transition from a child to an adolescent. The maturity of the child was to a large extent determined by the religious rites and rituals that children were qualified. Before the initiation rites of the children into adolescence, the child was the responsibility of the community. The transitional phases of a child from birth to death were celebrated with the rites of passage. These rituals significantly were social control mechanisms, to protect the members of the society.

For instance, sexual intercourse was forbidden for girls who had not gone through the *bragoro*. The social and religious consequences served as deterrence for members of the society. Thus, children born out of wedlock were a rarity. Also, adultery was forbidden by all accounts. The Ewes in Ghana for instance, deterred adulterous behaviors with a hex of chastity³. Although some of these social regulatory mechanisms have been criticized as a medium for the perpetual of patriarchy dominance in traditional African societies, these religious practices nonetheless provided protection for women and children in the society. For the African, religion defined the essence of his/her existence. In other words, for the African, religion was a component of the cultural system, which epitomized the ontology and epistemology of his/her existence. Thus, the removal of the African from his religious milieu has had grave consequences for children. Although Christianity condemned all traditional African religious practices, it could not guarantee the protections African enjoyed under the African traditional religious institution.

The political institution was also affected tremendously by colonialism. Imperial political structures replaced the modes of governance in traditional African societies. The use of traditional authority in governance by the colonizer through the indirect rule system fueled mistrust between the people and the traditional rulers. The role of the political institution changed from the primary goal of protecting members of the society, to the maintenance of law and order. The primary political object of the colonizer was to maintain absolute control over the colonized, to ensure an uninterrupted perpetuation of colonial ideology and policies. While I did not intend to fully explore the intricacies of the colonial political structure, I intend to claim that, colonialism drastically altered the political serenity of traditional African societies, and replaced it with a foreign concept of governance, which did not provide the needed protections for children.

For all of the institutional changes under colonial rule in Africa, the institution, which affected severely the concept of childhood and child rearing practices, was the economic institution. Before the advent of monetized economic institution in Africa, economic activity was organized around subsistence living and the barter system. Economic activities in the traditional Asante revolved around the *mbooa* system, which

² Bragoro is known as the rites of passage for the transition from a child to adolescence. For girl it is celebrated at the first sighting of her menstruation. For boys, they should have been able to endure circumcision without expressing pain, or they must have braved the odds of darkness to hunt for a difficult game in the thick forest alone.

³ A spiritual charm, which was placed under a door mate at the entrance of the abode of a couple. Ironically the hex of chastity only affected the wife and not the husband.

was a cooperative farming system where community members would help each other on the farms during farming seasons. Colonial economic system introduced for the first time the concept of poll taxes and the payment of fees for schooling. Valentine & Revson (1979), assert that:

Throughout much of Africa, the introduction of the head or hut tax required major modification of the social structure. Africans no longer worked only on their needs, but also had to meet the requirements of the colonial administration or lose their land (p.464).

Colonial economy soon introduced the cash crop economy for the sole intent of making Africa the hub of raw material export. The concept of the urban area began to evolve. Men stayed for long periods away from their families, which culminated in changes in social behavior patterns. Valentine & Revson (1979), posits that "...by going into town, both men and women had a chance to enjoy freedom from family discipline, and they subsequently became less submissive to the social controls which had governed their behavior since early childhood" (p.464).

Due to the dislocation caused by colonial political economy, many children lost their status as economic assets for their families and became economic liabilities. Political economic policies of colonial times did not only introduce institutionalized poverty, but also legitimized the use of children as labor. Children as part of the labor force makeup of the colonial political economy of Africa forever changed the concept of childhood and child rearing practices in contemporary African societies. Occupational patterns of the new political economy could not sustain the subsistence agricultural practices of the traditional African societies, and diminished the relevance of the extended family system, which provided support and production for children.

Due to the factors discussed above, the notion of the child as a vulnerable member of society in need of protection and care was no longer tenable. The commercialization of the children in contemporary Africa is one of the main factors that impinge upon the development of the child today.

Another socio-political factor worth noting when discussing the concept of the child in contemporary Africa is globalization. I must emphasize that globalization is not a new phenomenon, but was actually in operation during Africa's period of colonization. However the recent surge in globalization has placed Africa at the receiving end of the global political economic enterprise. The continuous engagement of Africa in the global economic and political enterprise has created a dependency syndrome, whereby contemporary African states must rely on the benevolence of industrialized western societies for survival.

Out of this dependency, was one of the most diabolic socio-political prescriptions for the development of African states, the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs). These programs were designed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), to revamp the ailing economies of African states. The unintended consequences of these programs produced some of the most severe social catastrophes in recent times. As part of the conditions for the SAPs implementation, all social services including, welfare programs, government subsidies on health and education were abolished. Unfortunately, the most affected by these policies were children. Increased poverty as a result of the SAPs, which also required African countries to fulfill their foreign debts obligations, further jeopardized the wellbeing of children in many communities. Bass (2004) opined that:

These structural adjustment policies have created general suffering in many poor countries, and particularly among children, by cutting government expenditure on food, healthcare, social services and education in order to save money for debt repayment.....the impact of the global debt crisis on children found that externally imposed measures have directly or indirectly impeded child survival, childhood immunization, economic growth, prevalence of health attendants, and adequate nutrition (p.52).

Although the predicament of children in Africa in general and Ghana particularly can be blamed on the changing trends in global political, economic and social dimensions, local leadership in Africa cannot be spared of complicity. Endemic corruption in most African countries has been detrimental to the promotion of child welfare. Bass (2004) maintains that:

Corrupt leaders and poor oversight among the educated elite have crippled the ability of African societies to get ahead economically. Across the board, the average African has a lower standard of living and

is saddled with more debt today than at independence. Forty years later, children are born in societies strapped with debt and low incomes, and therefore their children toil away their childhoods in order to eke out a living for their families and pay the debts of the previous generation of elites (p, 53).

One last important influential factor that has affected children and childhood in Ghana and Africa in general has been the ravaging effects of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. It is estimated that about 7000 deaths in Africa are AIDS related (Bass, 2004). This has had and continues to have a profound impact on children. Firstly, in many communities that have been ravaged by the AIDS pandemic, children have lost many of their parents and caretakers. The family structure which used to be a haven for children is on the brink of total extinction because many of the members have been claimed by AIDS. Bass (2004) further posits that "AIDS has broken up the family structure, and it is now common to see grandparents caring for children, countless children caring for children, and many orphans caring for orphans" (p.59). Many of these children have had to play the roles of adults without adequate preparation and support from the family system. The resulting consequences have greatly affected the ability of children to just be children.

I have discussed the factors that have influenced the concept of childhood and children in Africa and Ghana. Albeit many of the examples that have been cited from the general perspective of the African situation, they apply directly to the Ghanaian situation. Ghana has been a direct beneficiary of all the negative factors that have affected children on the African continent in contemporary times.

I have asserted that childhood and children including child rearing practices have undergone tremendous transformation. However, in spite of all these changes I can not amply justify that childhood has ceased to exist in contemporary Africa and Ghana particularly. The changes in the social structure have indeed changed the roles and responsibilities of many of the social actors in the Africa, but children continue to be children in other ways. Irrespective of the changing roles of children in Ghana today, children continue to participate in shaping their image in the society. Children continue to display their biological and psychological immaturity and the general society still perceive children as helpless beings. Childhood will be dead when children there are no more children, however, the position of the child continues to change and in many cases in a negative spectrum. The dynamics of childhood in Ghana is shaped by economics. Children from wealthier families may have the luxuries of protected childhood, the reverse is truism for many who have been affected by some of the factors discussed above. Many children are forced into traumatizing experiences of adult responsibilities without the needed securities. I will thus argue that childhood still pertains in Ghana, but the experiences of children have changed as a result of some societal imbalances that I have discussed.

The changing social dynamic in Ghana and many parts of Africa has undermined the communal philosophy of living, which had the proverbial accolade of the child being reared by the whole village. I must emphasize that the socio-political changes that have occurred in Ghana and other parts of Africa have been incapable of exterminating all the cultural and identity traits of the societies. Most children in Ghana are born within a socio-cultural context. Children are either born in the villages/rural areas or the cities/urban areas. The context within which children are born determines the extent of community involvement in their upbringing. In cities/urban areas, childrearing is the primary responsibility of the individual household, which consists primarily of a wife and a husband. In many cases, occupational demands on the parents will demand a surrogate taking responsibilities of the immediate needs of the child. In an urban context the philosophy of social organization is based on individualist thinking. The community, which rears the child in urban context, will be the biological parents, and social institution like schools, churches, and the media.

This is very different from the context in the villages/rural communities, where the child may still exist within the contours of the extended family system and community solidarity to each may still exist. Nonetheless, with the mitigating factors discussed above, there is no society in Ghana which is isolated from the effects of the changes that have occurred. The communities may still be in existence, but their commitment and motivation towards the protection and rearing of the child within their preferred context has been altered by many of the exogenous factors, which we have discussed above. In other words the village is no longer a sanctuary for children.

Conclusion

I affirm that childhood to some extent still exists in Ghana and Africa. In this paper, I have developed the concepts of childhood and child-rearing practices in Ghana from the African perspective. Although Africa is the most diverse population in world, their historical legacies makes their problems some what generalizable. Although it may differ in intensity, the prevailing factors that define the problems of Ghana are the same for the African continent.

The continent as a whole suffered a cultural invasion from the dominant Western cultures. As I have discussed above, the invading cultures enforced their values on Africans and preached a doctrine of inferiority of the African value and belief systems. Many Africans internalized the inferiority doctrine, which forever changed the social and moral fabric of the African essence. As Freire (1970) rightly opined "Cultural conquest leads to cultural inauthenticity of those who have been invaded: they begin to respond to values, the standards, and the goals of the invaders" (p.153). The interference in the philosophy of the African with the introduction of European domineering philosophy also affected the value placed on children in Africa. Whilst Europe was reforming its laws and developing appropriate developmental strategies for its children, Africans in Africa were losing the traditional protection inherent in the culture for children. Freire (1970) asserts that "a rigid and oppressive social structure necessarily influences the institutions of child rearing and education within that structure. These institutions pattern their action after the style of the structure, and transmit the myths of the latter" (p.154).

As I have discussed in the previous sections, cultural invasion on Africa did not only happen with colonialism. Modern techniques of domination have equally impacted Africa in a very negative way. I discussed the role of globalization in the predicament of the African child, where the children have been commercialized. Childhood and child-rearing practices have been tailored to satisfy the labor demands of the global economic engine. Rapid urbanization and increased demand for cheap labor has disrupted traditional child rearing practices, and exposed children to early forms of social and political hazards. Furthermore, I discussed the roles of SAPs and foreign debt burden on Africa and its concomitant effects on childhood and children. Some of the blame was also leveled against the political leadership and the intelligencia in Africa for their failure to provide the needed leadership and protection for children in vulnerable positions. Corruption, civil and ethnic unrest, and other internally destructive actions have been detrimental to the development of children. The solutions to the problems pertaining to children in Ghana and Africa in general lie in the reevaluation of the concept of the child within the philosophical framework of Africa. Freire (1970) offers an approach, which is cultural action. Freire posits that cultural action is "a systematic and deliberate form of action which operates upon the social structure, either with the objective of preserving that structure or of transforming it" (p.179). Africans need to examine critically their social structure, and that which militates against the development of decent childhood and child-rearing practices be eliminated. The African system should purge itself from the intrusion of other cultures, which dilutes the African thought processes.

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