

Conceptions of “Child” among Traditional Africans: A Philosophical Purview

Amasa Philip Ndofirepi^{1*} and Almon Shumba²

¹*Education Studies, Wits School of Education, University of the Witwatersrand,
Johannesburg, South Africa.*

E-mails: amandochi@gmail.com or ndofiamasa@live.com

²*School of Teacher Education, Faculty of Humanities, Central University of Technology,
Free State, Bloemfontein 9300, South Africa*

E-mails: ashumba@cut.ac.za, almonshumba@yahoo.com

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ABSTRACT In this paper, the researchers present a theoretical discussion of the notion of “child” in traditional African communities. The researchers’ premise is that different societies have unique conceptions of child and childhood hence each group of people have a peculiar philosophical outlook of a ‘child’ notwithstanding some similarities in places. While the researchers acknowledge that there is a multiple range of socio-cultural communities present in Africa, they submit that there are common threads that connect the African worldview. Their thesis is founded on their Shona background although they attempt to make comparisons with other African cultures. The researchers survey the different conceptions of the notion of *child* in traditional Africa from a historico-philosophical perspective.

INTRODUCTION

Philosophers have given attention to the vulnerability of children and their need for protection and control; their duty to love and honour their parents, obligations of parents to care and shape their children according to some pre-determined patterns. However, they have given less written attention to the ontological and metaphysical status of children. While Plato, Aristotle, Rousseau, Kant and Locke have been recognised for their contributions to an understanding of children in the said respects, post-modern philosophers have been “...content to accept without challenge whatever notions of children...” (Scarre 1989: ix) although “...the future of any society is determined by the quality of its children...” (Boakye-Boateng 2010: 104). Many presume to know much about children—whether because they have all been children, or because they have children around them and maybe because they have spent so much of their time taking care of children, or studying and teaching them. As a result, adults have taken

themselves to be the yardstick of what they pronounce about childhood and they explain children from themselves, that is, from what they (the adults) have been, or from what they imagine they have been. But does this imply that they are fully aware of what it is to be a child?

The notion of “child” cannot be discussed outside the dimensions of childhood as a social phenomenon. The central premise here is that ‘child’ is not a natural or universal category, pre-determined by biology, nor is it something with a fixed meaning. On the contrary, childhood is historically, culturally and socially variable. It is a truism that ‘child’ and childhood are best understood within a cultural context and to attempt to universalise the concept child is a misrepresentation of the world of children. In this paper, the researchers submit that children and the notion of ‘child’ have been regarded in very different ways in different historical epochs, in different cultures and in different social groups. In addition, the researchers observe that the meanings of childhood and child are not rigid and therefore are subject to a constant process of struggle and negotiation in public discussions including the media, in the academy and in social policy; and in interpersonal relationships, among peers and family members.

The researchers explore the notion of child in the traditional African context. It is however

**Address for correspondence:*

Dr. Amasa Philip Ndofirepi
Education Studies, Wits School of Education,
University of the Witwatersrand,
Johannesburg, South Africa.
*E-mail: amandochi@gmail.com or
ndofiamasa@live.com*

inaccurate to argue that all African societies have the same conception of 'child' although there are some dominant themes that appear to permeate their general understanding of the notion (Ndofirepi 2013). The researchers recognise the extraordinary cultural diversity of the African continent, but at the same time the researchers were aware that it is not impossible to extricate some common strands of thinking that typify the world of the African child. The researchers will narrow focus this paper on the following central topical issues: (a) What is the concept of 'child' in traditional African contexts and how does it differ from other conceptions in history over time? and (b) What is the nature of the adult-child relationship insofar as ethical, metaphysical and epistemological considerations are concerned?

The researchers wish to draw significant links between "the new discourses of childhood" (James, et al. 1998: 207) which understands the child as '*being*' and the traditional African notion of *child*. This paper will examine childhood within the context of the cycle of life, the family and the life and the knowledge of children; and childhood as a psychological concept that refers to the early experiences influencing human character and behaviour and as a social construction, a set of ideas about children and their ways. As a philosophical inquiry, my exploration into the notion of childhood may be thought of as belonging to a philosophy of persons which Kennedy (2000: 517) defines as, "... an inquiry into what adults know about children and the experience of adulthood".

To understand the notion of the child, the researchers raise some metaphysical questions: What constitutes "child"? Are there any differences ontological and metaphysical between adults and children? To what extent is notion of childhood and therefore 'child' a cultural construct? Are there similarities and differences between the children's and adults' conceptions of the world? The researchers also ask epistemological questions. How do traditional adult Africans perceive children's knowledge? To what extent do adults contribute to the knowledge of young entrants to the human world? Questions of ethical standing will also be examined in this context. Can children separate right from wrong in their own world even when uninterrupted by adults? Is the notion of "the African child" located in the "...discourses of the innocent child,

the irrational child and the sinful child" (Woodhead 2009: 17) or it is positioned in the new discourses of a developing, right-bearing child as expressed in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of a Child?

The analysis below will concern childrearing practices from distinct cultural backgrounds in Africa to make intellectual inferences on the concept of childhood in Africa (Boakye-Boateng 2010). The researchers' personal experiences of the Shona culture coupled with the socialisation processes they were exposed to as a child through to their transition into adulthood will also act as a starting point for some of the claims this debate will raise. In addressing the traditional African perception of a child the researchers provide a theoretical description; drawing the explanatory abstract data from their cultural background experiences among the Shona people of Zimbabwe as well as from other African ethnic groups as far as they are portrayed in the literature. It is important at this stage to reveal that in their essentials "African cultures, metaphysics, attitudes and customs are at least very similar, if not entirely the same" (Tangwa 2000: 41). Consequently, for the purposes of this paper, generalisations and in many cases prescriptions, may be held to have certain plausibility.

'Child' in Context

Broadly speaking, a "child" in Africa will be compartmentalised into the traditional person who is little affected by modernisation, the transitional person often living in, and shuttling between traditional African and western cultures, while the modern individual is one who participates fully in the activities of the contemporary, industrial or post-industrial world (Peltzer 2002). While the researchers concur with the categorisation made by Peltzer, it is necessary to remark that our analysis will take care and avoid the risk of "...succumbing to stereotypes and glossing over the heterogeneity and complexity of psychological phenomena in Africa" (Peltzer 2002: n.p.). For this paper, however, the thrust is on traditional Africa; what can be referred to as "the unadulterated Africa, that is, prehistoric Africa" (Boakye-Boateng 2010: 107). In this context, the concept of *child* and *childhood* in African thought surveys deeply into the African understanding of characteristic features that constitute a child and childhood re-

spectively. Hence, when people ask what a child is or what is the nature of a child or more fundamentally who is a child, the response is, what has been described as “a departure from the metaphysical and empirical realms to the sociological-normative realms which engages an inquiry into people’s perceptions of cultural and personal identities” (Fayemi 2009: 167). It therefore follows, in this view, that the notion of a child becomes specific to a culture. This is justified by the observation that children’s development is a social and cultural process and children do not grow up on their own but learn to think, feel, and communicate and act within social relationships in the context of particular cultural settings and practices, mediated by how children should be treated and what it means to be a child (Richards et al. 1986; Schaffer 1996; Woodhead 1998).

Traditional African “Child”

Children, it is commonly assumed, are those subjects who are yet to reach biological and social maturity or simply they are younger than adults and are yet to develop those competencies adults possess. Further to this, the less-than-adult status implies that childhood is a stage in human development when children are to be developed, stretched and educated into their future adult roles. This could take the form of schooling and or also through the family and wider social and civic life. The developmental perspective of childhood is rooted in the view that children are in a position of immaturity represented by being irrational, incompetent, and asocial and acultural, passive and dependent. Children are, in this vein, seen as human *becomings* rather than human beings, who through the process of socialisation are to be shaped into fully human adult beings (James et al. 1998). This view is similar to the Aristotelian philosophy of childhood with emphasis of the mature adult being a final cause – the end or purpose – of everything that comes earlier in human development from embryo to the infant and the child (Matthews 2006). A child is only understood accurately by making reference to what children should naturally become. Considering children as being incompetent and incomplete, this perspective regards them as “adults in the making rather than children in the state of being” (Branen, et al. 1995: 70). Consequently, adults are

perceived to be translators and interpreters of children’s lives and therefore adults are right and children are wrong. Given this characterisation of “child”, does such a perspective allow the young to criticise, argue and challenge the beliefs and doctrines that are the status quo in African communities?

Traditional African thought and practices are rooted on the principle of communalism (Fayemi 2009) where community implies a social-political set-up made up of persons or who are linked together by interpersonal bonds; with communal values which define and guide their social relations. Like in other social settings, the family in traditional Africa is the most basic unit (Muyila 2006). It exhibits the strongest sense of solidarity which extends beyond the nuclear members that is --husband, wife and children to the larger group, mainly linked by blood. The child’s welfare is thus located within string of kinship and relatedness in the community of relationships. In fact every child is everybody’s child (Hansungule 2005). Characterised by a communalistic philosophy, traditional African communities place the child in close contact with a larger group, socialise the young into the group, and the group in turn has the responsibility towards the child. The child responds by offering a duty towards not only the immediate family members but also the larger community. Thus a reciprocal relationship prevails. The reciprocity principle entailed values “sharing resources, burden, and social responsibility, mutual aid, caring for others, interdependence, solidarity, reciprocal obligation, social harmony and mutual trust” (Oyeshile 2006: 104). The community demands that the child forsakes individual good in order to submit to the collective interests. Opposed to the western worldview that attaches great importance to individual interest, autonomy, universality, natural rights and neutrality (Daly 1994), the African communalistic worldview stresses the common good, social practices and traditions, character, solidarity and social responsibility. Given the above characterisation of the traditional African community, the question then is how do traditional Africans define a “Child”?

Traditional Africans endorse the view that the community is more important than the individual and it takes precedence over the individual. In addition to the significant role the community plays in prescribing norms to the indi-

vidual who is expected to imbibe and retain them as definitive of him/her, individuals are not given the option to question but simply receive and live out them to the best of their abilities if they are to become fully recognised 'persons' in their respective communities. The traditional paternalistic conception of childhood treats the child a blank slate in need of protection and training for adulthood just like conceptions of childhood in other societies. Menkiti (1984: 173), contrasting western and African conception of personhood, comments: "As far as Africans are concerned, personhood is something at which individuals could fail, at which they could be incompetent or ineffective, better or worse. Hence, the traditional Africans emphasised the rituals of incorporation and the overarching necessity of learning the social rules by which the community lives, so that what was initially biologically given can come to attain social selfhood, i.e. become a person with all the inbuilt excellences implied by the term". In addition, traditional Africans consider the child delicate; one who needs extra attention and protection. The birth of a new child is characterised by community welcome, and the community invests in the child, who is given a name from the departed family or community member.

Menkiti (1984) posits that personhood is not automatically granted at birth but is achieved as one gets along in society. For him, it takes quite a lot of time to accumulate knowledge of social values and norms thus the more knowledgeable in terms of these values the *more person* you become. The idea that some children may fail to become persons corresponds with the Platonic child that never becomes adult in the harmony of the tripartite self. In fact Plato (1941: 138) asserts that "some, ...(*children*), never become rational, and most of them only late in life". In the traditional African view of a *person*, some adults will remain with the label "child" despite their age because they fail to meet the social criterion of being adult. Similarly, young individuals and children are *lesser persons* because they still have a lot to learn the moral requirements of their communities. Consequently, one becomes a person as one gets older and more accustomed to the ways of one's respective community and conversely one remains a child as long as they fail the personhood in the adult. Describing this attainment of the status of a person through gradation and socialisation, Men-

kiti (1984: 176) adds thus: "...personhood is the sort of thing which is to be attained, and is attained in direct proportion as one participates in communal life through the discharge of the various obligations defined by one's stations. It is the carrying out of these obligations that transforms one from the it-status of early childhood, marked by an absence of moral function, into the person-status of later years, marked by a widened maturity of ethical sense- an ethical maturity without which personhood is conceived as eluding one. Gyekye (1997) has a different understanding from that of Menkiti above. He opines that an individual is not completely defined by the social structures that he/she finds herself/himself in. Although many of our goals are set by our existential communities, it is still open for individuals to make own choices and decide on what goals to pursue and what to give up.

It is unsurprising that Gyekye (1997: 55-56) puts forward that, "...the communitarian self cannot be held as a cramped or shackled self, responding robotically to the ways and demands of the communal structure (thereby)... reducing a person to intellectual or rational inactivity, servility, and docility ...(but) the self nevertheless, can from time to time take distanced view of its communal values and practices and reassess or revise them". Echoing the same view, Bell (2002) holds that although the community is seen as prior to the individual that view does not absolve the individual of her responsibility and it does not deny the individual identity of person. Further to that, upholding community does not necessarily deny the individual "her potential creative role in a community "...(*however*) as multicultural factors increase, new values are placed on older ones- the African concept of community must be re-valued in the light of the present realities" (Bell 2002: 64). Despite acceding to the place of community in the understanding of the individual in Africa, Bell like Gyekye is of the view that this understanding must not be at the cost of individual recognition and responsibility.

At this point, it may be vital to speak to the manner childhood as *beginning* is esteemed in traditional African communities. The question is: what is the meaning of *beginning* and what are its implications? The notion of beginning is acknowledged as the lack of experience, with the necessity for support, with something de-

prived of its own highest value, with the start of an arrangement beforehand determined, and even with the first part of an outlined whole (Leal 2005). Similarly, childhood in its association with concepts of *beginning*, buttresses the notion that children need understanding, adult help, and hence protection and since they are *not yet* ready. This stage in human life implies an age of absence of responsibilities, the lack of autonomous thinking, and is one in which young individuals miss the seriousness in dealing life issues. If childhood has been socially and historically associated with this idea of lack, absence or incompleteness such an understanding places the adult universe at a vantage point of filling, completing what is supposedly missing. The researchers therefore agree with Nandy's (1987: 57) analysis that "To the extent adulthood itself is valued as a symbol of completeness and as an end-product of growth and development, childhood is seen as an imperfect transitional state on the way to adulthood, normality, full socialisation and humanness". The idea also suggests the child as a *deficit savage* who needs to be delivered from the residues of inhuman progress. However, this does not sound plausible since children, despite their inadequacies in terms of many adult performances and expectations still have the potential to achieve the adult expectations as they grow into maturity without taking away the humanness in them. The fact that they lack these capacities in their present positions due to their age may not make them savages just as some adults may fail what some children can do.

The dangerous physical background of traditional Africa may form the starting point for explaining the cultural milieu in which the child exists. On this view, common patterns were cultivated within the context of a communocratic and organic principle especially given the "...climate, insect, and endemic diseases ...the society was tightly organised, communal in nature with kinship systems in extended families ...(*forming*) a network of relationships that carried benefits and obligations to each other" (Valentine et al. 1979: 375). Again, African culture, like any other, also recognises that childhood is a shaky state where the young must be sheltered and granted support in conformity with the cultural ends. Meanwhile, the value of children in Africa, as is elsewhere around the globe, is elevated. The adult members work hard to

ensure that children's survival and proper growth are no doubt important and therefore Africans are devoted to the appropriate development of children as well as to their security from all forms of physical, social and intellectual harm (Ncube 1998).

For example, among the Shona people, right from day one after birth, while in the care and protection of the mother, extended family member and neighbours come and congratulate the mother '... for giving them yet another member in the family and neighbourhood' (Muyila 2006: 17). To this end, Gelfand (1965: 19), referring to the case of the Shona people of Zimbabwe's value for children writes: "The Shona people, like any other African societies display an intense desire to have children, and if a woman does not fall pregnant or desire to have children, and if a woman does not fall pregnant give birth to a living child, her family goes to any lengths to find a remedy". In the above case, the researchers recognise a relationship between the western and African value of children as regards the protection and development of children though, at the basic level, differences start to emerge as every culture has its own conception of what comprises appropriate child rearing and care practices. The question that needs attention then is: If "child" is a protected member, how much autonomy is he/she granted to explore and reflect on the beliefs and doctrines held true by their respective communities?

Further to this, traditional African children are "citizens-in-waiting" and are "... potential bearers of rights, which they may exercise only when they have reached the age of reason" (Arniel 2002: 70). If childhood is thus defined as a process of becoming, adulthood is, without reservation, seen as a finished state. In this sense, adult qualities such as rationality, morality, self-control and 'good manners' clearly make adults privileged above children while the goods of childhood are less valuable. The child's voice in an adult-child relationship becomes silenced and invisible. In effect such a traditional African conception "...locates children within the (macro) social structure and is more interested in the systematic denial of their agency" (Garaudy 1975: 128). The goods of lovingness, naturalness, freshness of vision, frankness and sincerity and imagination that characterise the child's life are downplayed in the traditional African communities. Instead, institutions such as educational

and other socialising agents are established not as violent or destructive forms of power.

The image of the “child” is one of strict discipline and parental constraint and traditional Africans are convinced that if left to their own devices, children would turn out badly. For their sake, parents must instil good habits from an early age. Metaphorically this is associated with horticulture rather than natural growth; “...of preparing good soil, of rooting out weeds, of training young shoots in the direction you want them to go” (Cunningham 1995: 48). The researchers observe an emphasis on control, regulation and discipline. The process of socialisation in this vein can best be described as “... a battle... a form of combat where the headstrong and stubborn subject has to be ‘broken’, but all for their own good” (Jenks 1996: 71). Also given the strong religious inclination of traditional Africans, childhood entailed a spiritual component based on the belief in reincarnation. Children are believed to be reincarnated ancestors who lived and died in previous generations who, so revered, have re-appeared in the newly born. Children are thus not only accorded respect by members of society, but society takes it upon itself to protect and socialise the child in the culture of the group. However, there is an apparent contradiction. If ancestors are reincarnated as children, why the need to socialise the children since upon their departure of earthly lives they (ancestors) were fully socialised and well respected for their wisdom of cultural beliefs? The question is why the fuss and stress on socialising the reincarnate?

One of the basic philosophical principles of traditional African society is group solidarity and social harmony. This is demonstrated by the harmonious bond between the individual member and the group. The individual is viewed in terms of the collective. It is not just the immediate family but every member of the community that has the duty to take care of welfare of the child. On this view, “...everybody is responsible for the other” in this extended family system which is “a very large baobab-like institution” (Hansungule 2005: 382) where virtually nobody is excluded. Undoubtedly, the child keeps in contact with the larger group and is convinced that life is not only about the immediate family but also into seeing beyond one’s family.

The Akan people of Ghana respect the artistic symbol of the chain as a symbol of human

relationship. Hence, the meaning of the symbol is as follows: “we are linked together like a chain; we are linked in life, we are linked in death; persons who share a common blood relation never break away from one another” (Gyekye 1997). Drawing from these assertions, the researchers are persuaded to accept that in traditional Africa, everything boils down to the “me” in the “we” or rather the survival of the self for group enhancement and consolidation (Nyasani, 1997). Rousseau observes in such form of relationship the inequality of power and status that denies and destroys the natural equality and dignity of man. He concluded that the child in society is first forced into unhealthy docility before being “...taught a set of values that presuppose one man’s being able to master the will of another” (Rousseau 1963: 76). The above observations have implications on the development of the child, socially and intellectually as seen in the analysis later in the study. But the critical question is: to what extent is the perception of child in the traditional African sense permissive to children’s opportunities to form their own opinions and express their viewpoints in a decision-making situation? In other words are there opportunities in traditional settings for children to be reasonable, creative, and caring thinkers?

The traditional African child is a socialised being from birth into the authority dimension which is based on the principles of age and seniority and which is made up of the mother, elder siblings, father, elders, ancestors and God. Adults depict the child’s life outside the home or neighbourhood as full of danger thereby seeking respectively to protect their children thereby denying them autonomy. This weakens children’s trust in their own authority. It comes as no surprise that even the African Children’s Charter (CRC) Article 27 endorses this dimension by entrenching that “,, [e]very individual shall have duties towards his family and society” while under Article 31(a) the individual shall also have the duty to “...work for the cohesion of the family, to respect his parents, superiors and elders at all times and to assist them in case of need” (Sloth-Nielsen, et al. 2008: 164). The two articles are rooted in the African belief that because adults have had sufficient experience of life and are ethically complete due to their own earlier training while children’s cognitive faculty for deliberation is not developed, children are not capable of choice. Writing about the Shona peo-

ples of Zimbabwe, Gelfand (1965: 16) further illustrates the previous view by pointing out that “Almost every Shona reveres his parents. Not only does the child love them, but he looks up to them and accords them proper respect. He listens to them, seldom argues with them and tries to avoid causing them pain. Honour thy father and thy mother is far stronger in the Shona than among the Europeans”. In the researchers experiences among the Shona people described above, as parents become older their children’s respect for them increases because they will soon be in the next world where they exert considerable power over their offspring. In concurrence, Muyila (2006: 42) posits that, “Advancing in age means continual improvement and accessibility to more rights, power, knowledge and wisdom” thereby leaving the young child at the lowest level without rights, power and knowledge. The above goes to point that traditional Africans perceive a child as “...a man in the state of nature, not yet changed by society, naked like the first human beings, without a feeling of shame, ignorant, unconscious of his condition and destiny with an intact body and an intelligence which is still opaque and veiled” (Erny 1981: 23). This view is supported by Dewey (1927: 154) when he comments that ‘We are born organic beings associated with others, but we are not members of a community...everything which is distinctly human is learnt, not native’. This, as earlier observed, leaves us to question the notion of children as reincarnated ancestors. Then does it follow that when reincarnate as children, the ancestors become blank slates? If so should the living beings respect people without experience for that matter, that is, children without experience? In this sense, the child gains knowledge from experience and knowledge is not in-born. For Locke, the parents should have control over their children as children do *not yet* possess the knowledge and therefore the rights of adult citizens. Similarly, traditional Africans believe children, if left without the help of adult members, make mistakes that will not serve their best interests and those of their families and the community. It is on this knowledge lack that the older members of society accord themselves the roles of the custodians of knowledge. Similarly, it is only the eldest members of society whose opinions carry the greatest weight in social matters; what is referred to as ‘epistemological authoritarianism’ (Kaphagawani 1998).

Children in traditional Africa leave all decisions about their lives to be determined by a different age group with very different interest and outlook to life without their input. But if one subscribes to the school of thought that holds the view that knowledge has some kind of independent existence and has overwhelming power; that a person who possesses knowledge inspires awe, whatever the domain he exercises his knowledge (Erny 1973), then children rightly deserve their relative autonomy to create and possess knowledge suitable to their own age range. Consequently, children should be perceived as deserving a group of human beings equally the right to articulate informed decisions by engaging in dialogue with their own world in order to make meaning out of it. This may be justified by Locke’s assertion that “...curiosity in children is an appetite after knowledge... the great instrument nature has provided ... (*in order*) to remove that ignorance that they were born with... (*without which*) they will become dull, useless creatures” (Locke in Ulrich 1957: 372). While the children have the propensity to be inquisitive, in the case of traditional Africans, any allowance and disposition to question adult knowledge is a sign of disrespect of adult members.

The researchers agree with Sloth-Nielsen and Mezmur (2008) who hold that the duty to respect parents, elders and superiors expected of African children (though not unique to Africans alone), even as reflected in the CRC, is a positive tradition and an asset in the upbringing of the African children. They further posit that the duty to respect “...does not entail docility or unquestioning subservience... [but] encapsulates the widely value that age brings with it wisdom, knowledge and experience and that this requires that seniors be given due credit” (n. p.). While the researchers respect the foregoing position, the researchers query the amount of parental power in caring for children and rearing them to a point when they can act and decide on their own. Such a perception of childhood in the traditional African sense renders the place of “child” to a dependent of the adult. This understanding of childhood is also lacking what defines the adult –experience. The fact that children’s judgements are fallible does not justify the assumption that they are unable to reason. As Vico (1944: 145) puts it, “The age of childhood is reasonable but it has no material on which

to reason'. In other words, what children lack is the experience of the world but their logical prowess is developed enough to work with the information they obtain. The experiential world of child and adults are unique so there is no need to measure the child's world against the adult world.

Most traditional African societies do not use age as social criteria for distinguishing children from adults. Among traditional Africans "...rather than using age to define social status, social status defines age" (McNee 2004: 25). For example, in West African societies, an uninitiated person would remain a child in the eyes of society regardless of age (ibid). Furthermore, in African thought, person becomes person after the enviroing community gives him or her personhood; what he refers to as "...the processual nature of being" (Menkiti 1984: 127). Only through some process of incorporation, socialisation and ritualisation can children graduate into persons. Children, therefore, are considered to be "mere danglers to whom the description 'person' does not fully apply" (Menkiti 1984: 127). Without a long process of social and ritual transformation; which accord the child with "...the full competencies seen as fully definitive of man", children and new-borns are referred to as "*it*". Such a perception of childhood bestows on young members of the African society an object status with older individuals positioning themselves in the subject position.

It is important to note that in most traditional African communities, individuals know where they stand in the family and community structure. An individual does not want to doubt their status, nor does he or she seek higher status than the one they are entitled to or try to gain unfair advantage over fellow men. Those who use their personal positions to either elevate themselves or use others for reaching higher statuses are accused of being witches or sorcerers. This goes as far as strictly separating daily routines and duties along the lines of gender. As a result, division of duties is inculcated from the very early years with male members, including boys, allocated responsibilities usually accompanied by any risk of injury such as carrying something heavy, milking cows and going into thick forests to hunt wild animals. On the other hand, women and girls are usually responsible for collecting firewood, making clay pots, cooking food for the family. This understanding

in the context of traditional Africa can be explained in the metaphysical sense in that boys (and later man) are repositories of creative power whose goal is to increase and multiply and likewise girls (and later women) bring forth children to their husbands. This shows how, among the Shona and many other traditional African communities, the girl-child is said to be weaker and therefore inferior to her boy counterpart. In the case of a young child assuming responsibilities and tasks that are designated for the opposite sex, the whole family is disturbed and labels such behaviour abnormal. Therefore, among the Shona, for example, the whole family becomes unsettled if such tendencies persist to a point where a child is said to be afflicted by some evil spirit in which case they engage services of a witch doctor for cleansing. But the question then arises: How does such a sex-based demarcation set up by the family translate in a child-to-child relationship in a formal school set-up? To what extent do learners whose backgrounds insist on sex-based discrimination work collaboratively and caringly in a modern school environment?

In addition to the procreative function of man and women, and even from childhood, the traditional African background enhances creativity in all individuals. As (Dzobo 1992: 131) writes, 'The creative process...is seen as embracing the whole of man's (*a woman's*) life and his (*her*) relationships. The individual is to grow in the development of a creative personality and to develop the capacity to maintain creative relationship'. This calls to question two issues. First is the notion of creativity through relations with others. Of note is the emphasis that traditional Africans place on *ukama* (relationality) as a product of creative cooperation of individuals. Second is the contradiction of the notion of creativity especially with children. As discussed earlier, traditional Africans tend to suppress individual initiative and inquisitiveness especially in young members of society given that, they allege, this leads to undermining authority as well as the promotion of individualistic tendencies. But based on the above assertions how does the former enhance creative power especially in the growing members of society?

The researchers also need to unpack the African conception; and the concealed meaning of, the verb "*to have children*" which is frequently used in popular speech to express the

link between adults and children. Everyday language speaks of “How many children do you have?”, “We have seven children” or “we have eighty children in our family”. Such expressions represent possession of some form; that is, it equates having children with *ownership, possession and guardianship* of children. This also implies that because they are owned; they are “property” therefore they need to be protected from any form of danger and deflection that may cause them to stray from adult or parental possession. It also gives a representational image of the Kantian child which portrays children and wives as *possessions* of the head of family-the father. This view is in concurrence with John Stuart Mill’s children who must be “continuously protected from themselves as well as external threats to their safety” (Turner 1998: 145). Mill appears convinced that children are fundamentally vulnerable. Such is the African perception of child in the traditional African sense with child as property of both the immediate family as well as the concerned members of the extended family. In fact, the child is ‘our child’ in the essence of the community. This gives the impression that among traditional Africans, children as individuals are not taken seriously because it is believed that they do not know what they want or need and the perception is of children as objects or possessions whose views do not really matter.

While on the one hand traditional Africans conceive ‘child’ as *a not-yet* as explained above, they contradict themselves when they expect the same ‘child’ to participate and contribute to the welfare and survival of the family by providing labour such as taking care of young animals and tending the fields including providing day-time care for their younger siblings thereby adopting adult responsibilities. Thus, compared to the west, the African conception seems to grant more participatory roles to children. To that end, Ncube (1998: 21) writes “...the idea of a totally dependent child who is fed, clothed, educated and generally brought up at the expense of his parents is a concept which is alien to the traditional African setting”. As children participate in adult work, it enhances their feeling of recognition and consequently increases their self-confidence and the sense of competence from an early age. Besides, children can also be ‘lent’ to the extended family to provide labour especially to take care of the elderly relatives.

Meanwhile, they will be receiving training in their future cultural roles. In addition it is by so doing that children are apprenticed to appreciate the value of kinship, family, relatedness and in the final analysis community from an early age.

CONCLUSION

The conception of child in the African sense is not unique from conceptions held elsewhere although there some particularities that seem exclusive to African communities. The traditional African world-view of childhood holds that the child is delicate and needs protection and can only become a fully recognised person through some processes of incorporation by ritualisation, and training and socialisation. To be a child is to need the aid of parents or their delegates. A *Child* is also viewed to some extent as a saviour child, noble and responsible for others around him or her. What is lacking in this continuum of perceptions is the agentic child; one viewed as a capable actor and who shares power with adult members of the human species while simultaneously perceiving children as primarily weak, ignorant, irrational, incompetent, unrestrained and uncivilised. The questions the researchers leave for further debate, among others are: (a) Is it possible to speak of a pure traditional African child in the 21st century? and conversely; (b) Can we discern a traditional child given the age of westernisation, industrialisation and globalisation and urbanisation?

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