

# The Languages of Childhood: The Discursive Construction of Childhood and Colonial Policy in French West Africa

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In spite of the deceptive familiarity of the terrain, childhood, that stage of life that we are all supposed to experience, resists easy definition.<sup>1</sup> Our fascination with childhood experiences has created an international boom in autobiographies and children's literature, as well as in self-help manuals and in discourses, programs and policies concerning child abuse and child crime.<sup>2</sup> The images of children as "victims," "rebels" or "the hope of the future" that appear and reappear in these discourses suggest that we actually construct childhood as an object of concern, and that these constructions are products of a particular period and a particular cultural framework. These "languages of childhood," however, are usually foreign to children and to childhood taken as a phenomenological experience, for they are produced by adults attempting to understand their own or others' childhood. The difficulties involved in attempting to understand children and their history have also become a source of debate about the social sciences as disciplines. As Mary Galbraith writes:

[W]hat is really called into question by childhood studies, what is raised to visibility that was previously taken for granted as given, is the meaning of *adulthood* in relation to childhood. The crisis of legitimacy in all areas of authority in the last half of the twentieth century is particularly urgent with respect to the category *adults*. In fact, it may be that it is only by consciously reentering a childhood perspective on adulthood that we can find our way through some of the most difficult moral and intellectual challenges of our era.<sup>3</sup>

In undertaking an exploration of key questions in the history of childhood in French West Africa, with a special focus on Upper Volta, I hope to address the issues Galbraith raises in a double movement. Although we cannot speak for children, it is possible to enter their world as visitors. A brief discussion of Mossi children's games and their own views about their social roles is included in order to nuance the discussion of adult discourses about childhood that in fact reflected assumptions and policies related to adults in colonial West Africa. Moreover, gender roles are particularly important, just as they were during the colonial period. French colonizers' attempts to regulate indigenous sexualities through education and medical care were directly related to attempts to control childbirth and childcare in the colonies in order to swell the ranks of taxpayers and workers.

## POWER PLAYS

The ambivalence with which adults regard children can be explained in many ways. Although we might examine the psychological issues behind this ambivalence, the most obvious reason for it seems to be the power differential. Adults control children, or try to; ordinarily, adult society legitimates such control in

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spite of obvious cases of child abuse or neglect. Adult control of children thus needs no justification. This explains why African children were central to many of the discourses of French colonialism: all Africans were re-defined as children to justify the *mission civilisatrice* (the French equivalent of “the white man’s burden”). William Cohen has noted that it was common for the French colonizer to describe Africans as “peuples enfants” [infant peoples].<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the France of the Third Republic consistently defined itself in terms of its mastery of physical and technological problems. “A conflation of civilization with mastery was thus a defining and permanent characteristic of French rhetoric.”<sup>5</sup>

The very pervasiveness of this theme of mastery may blind observers to other, related discourses of childhood that were common during the colonial period. If all Africans were recast as children, then the task of defining the category to which the younger members of the community belonged must have seemed less important. Raymond Gervais has argued for this reason that the difficulties that we encounter in establishing the lines of demarcation between childhood and adulthood during the colonial period do not originate in the cultural dissonance between African and European definitions of childhood, but in the simple neglect of such distinctions. Census agents simply failed to count children, or failed to distinguish between adult and child members of the population.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, school and medical records show that administrators attempted to give statistics about children. Unfortunately, they only saw a tiny minority of the child population, making these statistics less useful for purposes of demographic history.

This penury is counterbalanced by other sources of information. Works by travelers and literati during the colonial period frequently included effusive and pitiful descriptions of the “misery” in which African children lived, as Janós Riesz has shown in an article on colonial literature from 1919-1930. These observers expressed the need for French involvement in children’s lives. “L’avenir des enfants, comme l’avenir tout court, est toujours du côté du Blanc, du colonisateur” [The future of the children, like the future itself, is always on the side of the White man, the colonizer] in the novels Riesz examines.<sup>7</sup>

In contrast, the administration’s attitude towards African children was quite different. Colonial administrators did not foresee problems that could arise if they attempted to force the French family code on Africans, nor did they see a need for changing the status of the child. Describing West Africans’ attitudes toward children in a 1935 report to the Minister of the Colonies, Governor General Brévié explained that:

Le tout jeune enfant noir a une telle place dans la famille que beaucoup d’observateurs en sont restés étonnés: on cède à tous ses caprices, on est arrêté devant le petit esprit qui s’éveille, cet esprit de l’enfant qui recèle une si grande part d’inconnu et qui, pour le noir comme pour beaucoup d’autres, mais pour tous nos noirs, provoque une admiration un peu inquiète. Il y a là une mystique de l’enfance qui rend presque inutile, pour le moment au moins, toute protection du petit noir en bas âge contre ses parents. Mais ceux-ci, pauvres trop souvent, mal éclairés sur les soins à administrer doivent être secondés, secourus, par nos oeuvres sociales d’assistance et de prévoyance.<sup>8</sup>

[The very young black child has such an importance in the family that many observers remain surprised by it: one gives in to all of his caprices, arrested by the little personality that is awakening, this spirit of the child that so contains so much of the unfamiliar and which, for the black as for many others, but for all of our blacks, provokes an admiration that is a bit troubled. Here there is a mystique of the child that, for the moment at least, makes any protection from his parents almost useless for the little black of tender years. But the parents, too often poor, poorly informed about the care they should give, should be seconded, aided, by our social works for assistance and provision.]

Recent ethnographic and historiographical accounts corroborate the importance of children in African households, *sans* racist, colonialist comments. In Richard Roberts' succinct discussion of children's status in the Sudan from 1905-1912:

Children were clearly a source of joy, a means of reproducing the community, and a source of labor to assist both the male household head...and the women of the household in their domestic duties. But children, especially girls, were also a source of wealth precisely in terms of their potential to secure goods, cash, and services in the form of bridewealth payments.<sup>9</sup>

Since children were a source of joy as well as wealth, it is easy to understand why the French administrators had few worries about children's status at this time.

Later attempts to "protect" children through legislation appear to have been aimed at urban areas, just as most of the other attempts to improve living standards affected urban areas first and foremost. Indeed, French attempts to win over their subjects by improving health conditions were often directed primarily at reducing infant mortality.<sup>10</sup> Many of the attempts at *assainissement* affecting the African population concerned neo-natal and natal care. Other attempts to assist children seem to have been voluntary, rather than obligatory, at least on the face of it. Volunteer members of *Le berceau africain*, and the *Gouttes de lait* set up by the *Dames Françaises*, organizations run by the European spouses of French colonial officials, contributed baby clothes, blankets, and foodstuffs to African mothers. Although these were volunteer organizations, the administration apparently expected its employees' spouses to play this kind of role.<sup>11</sup> In effect, colonial spouses were unpaid employees of the administration.

The clear demarcation of gender roles among the French themselves in the French colonial society in sub-Saharan Africa has received remarkably little attention, although films and novels about the issues of sex and gender in the colonies abound.<sup>12</sup> Given this relative paucity of material about Frenchwomen in the colonies who were active as volunteers, and indeed obligated to work as volunteers, it is useful to turn again to children and to the different criteria used to define childhood in French West Africa for a better understanding of what these volunteers were doing and saying. Their work clearly influenced the sentimental descriptions of African children in the colonies published during this time.

Children took center stage in many of the policies related to the *mission civilisatrice*, for they were to be the repositories of French culture, the agents of change who would anchor the French empire. Africans resisted colonial rule in many ways, as previous researchers have observed. In Burkina Faso, these acts of resistance ranged from armed revolts (particularly during World War I, when Africans resisted forced conscription) to the passive resistance of people who disappeared or refused to name all household members during censuses intended to swell the head-count for taxation purposes.<sup>13</sup> In addition, parents refused to send children to colonial schools, whenever possible. In response, school recruitment, according to Y. D. Maïga, was brutal: the interpreter and the police (*gardes de cercle*) combed the countryside for children who appeared to be of school age. Parents hid children in rolled-up mats and in granaries, but they were not always successful in protecting their children from enrollment in French schools.<sup>14</sup> Maïga gives the example of "Ali," who arrived at the market in Aribinda with a bundle of wood, only to meet colonial authorities who ordered him to go to the school in Ouahigouya, 110 kilometers distant. He was given only two weeks to make the trip.<sup>15</sup> Students who were enrolled often fled as soon as possible, leaving some classrooms empty. Whenever possible, soldiers rounded up these truants. Military action during colonization thus redefined children as hostages of French schools. Nevertheless, Africans slowly began to enter French schools and even fight for their children's admission to colonial schools when over-enrollment became a problem in urban areas.

In colonial discourse, French was indubitably superior to any other language, just as French culture was the only culture worthy of the valorization that comes with the term civilization. The *mission*

*civilisatrice* provided ample justification for colonization in the eyes of these isolated and anxious colonizers, yet it also distorted European discourses of liberty and equality, as Homi Bhabha notes.<sup>16</sup> The ultimate justification that proponents of the day used to promote assimilation was that it was non-racist: people of all races could become culturally French, and thus win French citizenship through merit. Of course, we know that in practice, very few *évolués* gained citizenship, and the French changed the requirements for *évolué* status based on local circumstances (Algerians, for instance, were forced to give up their religion after World War I, a new requirement for *évolué* status) and the likelihood of large numbers of subjects becoming citizens.<sup>17</sup> In any case, the policy was based on a form of cultural ethnocide that could hardly be called non-racist. The discourse of assimilation thus swallowed whole French notions of French identity based on republican virtues.<sup>18</sup>

## LEGAL LIES

In spite of some efforts to move towards a policy of association that implied respect for African family arrangements and a reluctance to adjudicate civil cases, the question of children's legal status became a pressing issue for the French administration in the early 1920's and late 1930's. First, because of efforts to apply French legislation regarding children to the colonies, later because of pressure from the League of Nations, and later still, in the early 1950's, because of the United Nations' plans to extend programs designed for child protection in post-war Europe to the colonies.<sup>19</sup>

Policies and legislation involving children took on unexpected political importance, for they threw into question the entire colonial system regulating legal status. By the 1920's, the tripartite structure of subjects, *évolués*, and citizens seemed fairly solid, yet the apparently innocuous legislation designed to protect children seemed, at least to administrators, to hold the power to rock that structure. Administrators posted to Africa did not always see things as politicians in Paris. Senegalese politicians had succeeded in persuading the French Parliament to pass legislation that granted French citizenship to residents of Senegal's Four Communes and to their descendants, in part because the French Parliament did not understand the repercussions such legislation would have on French control over the colonies, according to Alice Conklin.<sup>20</sup>

Administrators in the colonies clearly felt that the same was true of those who made efforts to extend French legislation to children in French West Africa. Correspondence between the Ministry of the Colonies and the Governor General in the 1920's demonstrates yet again this difference of perspective. In a letter dated 3 January 1924, the Minister of Colonies responded to Governor General Carde's project to extend the 1921 French legislation protecting "des enfants maltraités ou moralement abandonnés" [mistreated or morally abandoned children] in modified form by arguing that:

On ne saurait envisager, en effet, deux catégories de citoyens français: les uns soumis aux lois françaises, les autres régis par un statut particulier et relevant de juridictions spéciales. Les décrets qui ont assuré à certains indigènes musulmans le bénéfice d'une juridiction d'exception s'appliquaient uniquement à des sujets...Il est entendu que, dans ces conditions, la mesure dont il s'agit doit s'appliquer aux seuls citoyens français et à tous les citoyens français<sup>21</sup>

[One could not in fact imagine two categories of French citizens: some subject to French law, the others governed by a particular status and answerable to special jurisdictions. The decrees which assured certain Muslim natives of the benefit of a juridical exception applied only to subjects...It is understood that, in these conditions, the measure in question must apply to French citizens alone and to all French citizens.]

In defending the unitary nature of French citizenship, the Minister chose to ignore the use of an elaborate system defining different types of civil status the colonies. Quite clearly, the Ministry was subject to public opinion in France, and could not, or would not, accept the Governor General's efforts to protect the colonial order that represented an important means of controlling colonial populations.

In the dual legal system in French West Africa, African "sujets" brought civil and family cases to the customary tribunal, rather than to the French court. Customary tribunals therefore most often heard cases concerning children, which frequently were custody disputes. Although French officials played a role in these proceedings, they were not to overturn or influence a judge's decisions unless customary law was in conflict with the stated principles of "French civilization" during the early part of the century. This was a key part of Governor General Ponty's "politique des races," an attempt to season assimilation with association, based on the theory that European colonization could control Africans and also show some respect for their cultures.<sup>22</sup>

French administrators sometimes contravened Ponty's *politique des races* and played a role in child custody because the local laws grated upon their own sensibilities, according to Richard Roberts' study of the issue of marital instability and children in the French Sudan. The many changes in the nineteenth century in French codes concerning children were designed to protect child workers, but also "established the principle that the state had a right to protect the interests of children," probably making it easier for French administrators to justify using "changes in French metropolitan laws as cognitive templates regarding the rights of children."<sup>23</sup>

Certainly, administrators were concerned to prove to metropolitan audiences that they were improving living conditions for Africans, particularly for children. The Colonial Exposition of 1931 put pressure on administrators to present their colonies in glowing terms, as did the need to organize and exposition on the colonies for the International Congress on Childhood.<sup>24</sup> Louis Rollin, Minister of the Colonies in 1934, sent a circular (no. 29-4/S) out on 7 November 1934 expressing his delight that the Colonial Section at the Congrès International de l'Enfance in 1933 had "montré la grandeur de l'effort patiemment poursuivi dans les colonies françaises pour la protection de la maternité et de l'enfance" [shown the extent of the efforts for the protection of motherhood and childhood patiently pursued in the French colonies].<sup>25</sup>

This Congress seems to have inspired renewed interest in children, at least at the level of the Ministry of Colonies. Administrators in the colonies, however, resisted all efforts to apply French legislation for the protection of children to African children. They argued that it was impossible to apply laws that specified age as a criterion. Some of the issues included minimum working age, child delinquency and criminality (age of legal responsibility), and child head tax. The head tax was applied at various ages—in some French colonies, it was applied at age 8, in others at age 10 or 16. Students in French schools were dispensed from the head tax, an obvious incentive for enrollments.<sup>26</sup> In a 1935 note, the Director of Economic Services rejected the notion of a minimum working age of 16, saying that it would be too difficult to determine children's age.<sup>27</sup> In any case, France's own policies had contributed to an increased reliance on child labor, at least in Upper Volta. Dennis Cordell and Joel Gregory argue persuasively that in addition to military conscription, the demand for adult male labor in plantations in Côte d'Ivoire and in the Gold Coast meant that, women, children, and the elderly shouldered the work that men would otherwise have performed.<sup>28</sup> Administrative resistance to the extension of French legislation continued through the 1930's, and can be linked to administrators' resistance to the *évolués*' demands, as well as to labor migration patterns.

## CHILD'S PLAY

The problems involved in defining childhood by age may have persisted to the present, but most current definitions of childhood continue to rely on the western criterion of age. This is sometimes true even of African scholars such as Oger Kaboré, known for his work on Mossi children, as well as of western researchers. But as is well known, most West African societies did not use age, but social criteria for distinguishing children from adults. Rather than using age to define social status, then, social status defined age. An uninitiated person would remain a child in the eyes of society regardless of his or her age. Adulthood also meant and means successfully passing through stages such as marriage and parenthood.<sup>29</sup>

The anthropologist Amadé Badini writes that among the Mossi, one cannot really consider a baby a child until after it has been weaned. Until that time, the child is considered a stranger who might leave at any time, that is, he/she may die. Children, then, constitute a group of people that have been weaned, but not yet initiated.<sup>30</sup> Jacques Sanou concurs that this definition of childhood is also applicable to Bobo communities in western Burkina Faso, and adds a detailed description of the different ceremonies that usher the child into human status as a member of a community.<sup>31</sup> These conceptions of infancy and childhood are widespread across West Africa, according to Alma Gottlieb, whose research shows that most West African communities view infants as important members of society.<sup>32</sup> Although Gottlieb insists on the importance of distinctions between infancy and childhood, these concepts of infancy do affect the construction of childhood, if only because the fear that infants will choose to regain the spirit world, making surviving children all the more precious.

However, these, too, are adult perspectives on childhood. How do children define childhood? In some of the most innovative work on childhood being done in Burkina Faso, we learn that they consider themselves to be free, in contrast to adults, who are burdened by work and other responsibilities. In his work, Oger Kaboré demonstrates that girls learn to cherish their childhood. In a song he recorded near Koupéla, the girls sing:

La jeune fille se rit (se moque) de la femme mariée (ayant accouché)  
 Un jour la route se fermera (elle n'aura plus la liberté d'aller où elle veut)  
 Il suffit de trois ans pour qu'elle devienne tordue comme du coton filé (fil de trame)<sup>33</sup>

[The young girl laughs (mocks) at the married woman (who has given birth)  
 One day the road will close (she will no longer have the freedom to go where she wishes)  
 Three years are enough for her to become twisted like spun cotton thread (thread for weaving)]

Kaboré comments that although young girls aspire to marriage, they also fear it, because they observe and learn from their elders that the condition of a married woman is not always enviable.<sup>34</sup>

In the *zaka*, or minimal kinship unit of Mossi society, women hold an uncertain status at best, according to Marta Rohatynskyj.<sup>35</sup> “Small girls, as soon as they are able, take on simple domestic tasks within the natal *zaka*. By the time of adolescence, they are able to fulfill the complement of what is defined as women’s work.”<sup>36</sup> As young brides, they must work to prove that they are of value to the new family unit, and deserve a small plot of their own. Even elderly women “strive not to appear inactive; the relatively undemanding activity of spinning cotton thread is used to justify the existence of the infirm.”<sup>37</sup> In contrast, boys “spend a relatively carefree childhood.”<sup>38</sup> This contrast plays a role in advancing Rohatynskyj’s larger goal: she argues that Meillassoux’s theories ignore women’s productivity, reducing women to their reproductive role (perhaps she overstates the hardship of Mossi women’s lives; I leave this question to the judgment of the reader). In any case, Rohatynskyj’s overall presentation of the Mossi

*zaka* provides invaluable information on the context of the song Kaboré recorded and for my own argument that the social experiences of children are gendered in Mossi society.

Evidence confirms that boys, too, are aware of the power structure and express it in their songs. Young boys seem to express themselves more often in the festival called *Dodo* than in the ring songs girls prefer. Although Hausa traders and immigrants brought the *Dodo* to Burkina, as Priscilla Baird Hinckley, among others, has argued, it has become rooted there in urban culture. Although it has a greater following in Ouagadougou than elsewhere, the national competitions are televised, and other cities also boast of *Dodo* troupes. The festival takes place during Ramadan. In the evening, the boys traditionally costumed themselves (now the costumes have grown more and more elaborate) and went to different courtyards, singing and performing in order to gain small gifts or sums of money.<sup>39</sup>

Although I have not been able to conduct research in Burkina during Ramadan, one well-known *Dodo* performer who has performed in both Ouagadougou and Bobo-Dioulasso shared an opening song with me when I interviewed him in Bobo-Dioulasso in August, 1997.

Ayoo! Salam Aleykoumyaa!	Ayoo! Salam Aleykoum yaa!
Chorus: Abaabe!	Ababe!
Woto yaa no loera kinga laa!	Now it's the month of fasting!
Ababe!	
Tiwoto yaa no loera kinga laa!	Can the stranger receive something?
Ababe!	
Saan ye kon paana bumb laa?	In order to refresh himself?
Ababe!	
N ti kwili n ti lodge nor laa?	I tell you that the ancestors will be refreshed...
Ababe! <sup>40</sup>	

This fragment of a song from the festival shows that age has less to do with the singer's perception of his role in this children's festival than his relationship to others—as a stranger or in relation to the ancestors. Although a single song cannot tell us much about boys' perceptions of childhood, perhaps the comparison of the two songs confirms Badini's conclusion that sex, rather than age, determines children's experiences in large part.<sup>41</sup> The key denominator is the link to the ancestors; the singers stress this tie in the song, implying that those who offer gifts (refreshment) will be repaid by the ancestors' favor.

Ties to the ancestors are gendered, just as social status is defined in gendered terms. Male children will remain in the *zaka* of their patrilineal group, and will always “belong” to the unit, unlike girls, who marry into another *zaka*. According to Rohatynskyj, elderly men “have built up a store of claims which places them in the enviable position of owing nothing to any living being, their authority linked to the ancestors.”<sup>42</sup> Although the adult male and female roles that children are trained to aspire to change over time, the gendered differences seem to be a fairly constant aspect in the construction of childhood as a social category. The existence of separate initiation rites for boys and girls in Mossi society corroborates this construction.

To children, then, sex appears to define power and mastery as much, if not more, than age. Young girls are freer than their elders, and are instructed by women to enjoy the freedom of youth; on the other hand, boys are initiated into the greater responsibilities and power of adult male status. Although neither group escapes adult control, neither seems to believe that adults control children completely. Indeed, the

fact that Burkinabe parents, like many others across the world, cajole recalcitrant children, suggests that children, too, have some power over adults.

## CULTURE AND REPRODUCTION

Sex also mattered to the French administration. A multitude of studies have shown that European colonizers shaped or tried to shape gender relations between Africans in ways that fit their own conceptions, in order to regulate African societies and increase the numbers of colonized taxpayers and workers. Frenchmen and Frenchwomen were to model gender roles in the colonies, as the obligatory volunteer roles associating Frenchwomen with childcare indicate. Women were educated in domestic skills, hygiene and midwifery—all skills that were supposed to decrease the infant mortality rate and improve African children's health and well-being. Early novels and texts such as the midwife and political militant Aoua Kéïta's autobiography, offer information about French attempts to regulate childcare, but also reflect the tension between colonizer and colonized as they relate to children's status and care.

African *évolués* wanted their wives and daughters to help them achieve a higher status through the assimilation of French mores. Education was vital in that sense. Although the history of women's education in French West Africa has received extensive treatment, most current research has focused on the twentieth century. However, nineteenth-century African girls did receive education through various mission schools in Senegal, as Denise Bouche writes in her exhaustive thesis on education in the *Afrique Occidentale Française* (AOF).<sup>43</sup> Although education for girls was not widespread and African parents had reservations about it, by the twentieth century, the number of *évolué* fathers who wanted their daughters to receive some education had grown, making the establishment of girls' schools more important. At the same time, men wanted their daughters to fill gender-specific roles that did not conflict with either colonial gender relations or the current mix of African gender relations in the urban areas.<sup>44</sup>

In 1918, the French established a school for African midwives in Dakar, and later, in 1938, normal schools for female teachers were founded in Rufisque (Senegal) and Katibougou (Côte d'Ivoire). According to Jane Turriffin, "Colonial midwives were the most educated women in the AOF until 1938."<sup>45</sup> Ironically, the education that was meant to allow African women to serve the Empire by assisting in the birth of more laborers in the AOF also led to women's participation in the fight for the birth of new nations in the aftermath of decolonization. Turriffin's account encourages a turn toward Aoua Kéïta, one of the first female authors of an autobiography in francophone Africa, for information about women's roles and midwives' roles in the AOF. Kéïta was a midwife, but she was also an active member of the trade unionist movement and of the *Rassemblement démocratique africain* (RDA), and the first woman member of the party's central committee. After independence, she became a member of Mali's national assembly in 1960, and headed the women's branch of the party *Union nationale des femmes du Mali*.<sup>46</sup> Yet Kéïta concurs with Badini that for most women in the AOF, during the colonial period the social construction of women relied in large part on their reproductive role. Her description of women's role as mothers is telling:

The eternal refrain is the following: women do not participate in battle, nor in hunting parties, nor do they fish...The field of battle is childbirth, whose pain they must support with courage and dignity...For them, it is an ordeal which must be supported in honor. They have only the right to invoke the name of God.<sup>47</sup>

Childbirth not only defined women in the eyes of the colonizer, eager to increase the number of laborers, but also in the eyes of Africans who treasured children and often defined gender relations within marriage in large part on the basis of reproductive roles. Paradoxically, these parents were also children in the eyes of the Empire.

Responses to this situation varied across the Empire; however, traces remain, even in contemporary social interaction. According to Susan Rasmussen, contemporary Tuareg (Kal Ewey) society in Niger reflects this colonial past quite directly. This is apparent in local interactions with the ethnographer (a representative of the outsider who is associated with colonialism, in her opinion). Children become mediators between foreigners and adults in postcolonial spaces, just as they served as mediators during the colonial period.

For children, as adult representatives, may also become part of a local adult response to colonial and postcolonial encounters. Among Tuareg, this occurs in two ways. Local adults and children covertly resist authorities' frequent treatment of them as 'children,' and subtly comment upon the outside ethnographer's position as 'childlike' in Tuareg culture. The mediators in this dialogue are local children.<sup>48</sup>

This development simply reflects the earlier history of assimilation, for French colonialism was inscribed on the bodies and minds of African children attending colonial schools. Women, seen as "adult children" from the perspective of colonial authorities, were the initial targets for regulative education related to childcare, yet cultivating "black Frenchmen" through education was the ultimate goal.

## CONCLUSION

We must ask how an analysis of the colonial metaphor suggesting that all Africans were children, can help us better understand both, colonial and gendered, inter-generational relationships among Africans today. The comparison serves us here in that it stresses the difficulty of defining childhood, just as it highlights the complexities of describing the condition of the colonized. Whether we view childhood from an African or European perspective, from an adult or a child's vantage point, we cannot escape the social nature of childhood.<sup>49</sup> Ironically, French colonial administrators attempted to do so by defining childhood through biological criteria such as age. But this forced them to deal with the problems of applying French laws on African minors whose age was often difficult to discern and whose societies defined their status quite differently. Moreover, attempts to justify colonization as beneficial to children actually threw the entire colonial order into question by revealing the legal inconsistencies in the structure determining Africans' civil status.

Indeed, an examination of the assimilationist policies regarding children reveals the gap between the essentially military purpose of assimilation as a policy for "pacifying the natives" and the more overtly paternalistic motives behind child welfare and educational policies.<sup>50</sup> The military project of redefining children's horizons was never far from sight. Even after progressive instructors such as Georges Hardy insisted on African content in the texts, colonial education purveyed a French vision of the world and encouraged students to imitate the French in every way possible.<sup>51</sup> The scene of black African children claiming that their ancestors were blond and blue-eyed marked a site of double alienation. Not only did it mark the site of Africans' alienation, as Frantz Fanon claims in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), but also the alienation of French teachers and administrators who, fearing difference, attempted to appropriate the African Other through assimilationist discourse, as well as through discursive infantilization of all Africans.

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## NOTES

1. My thanks to Queen's University for an Arts & Sciences Research Fund (1998) that made archival work in Dakar, Senegal as well as preliminary interviews and archival work in Burkina Faso possible. My gratitude to WARA as well for funding a preliminary research trip to Burkina Faso in 1997. Special thanks to my research assistant and translator, Emmanuel Compaoré, and Adolphe Sanon, who greatly facilitated my research.

2. This is true in Africa as in the West, where educators and publishers have promoted children's materials that speak to their experiences. According to Adama Coulibaly of the Direction du Livre in Ouagadougou (personal communication, 1997), the government of Burkina Faso considers children's literature a vital concern. In addition to pioneers like Nancy Schmidt, other scholars are now paying more attention to children's literatures in Africa. See *Children and Literature in Africa*, eds. Chidi Ikonne, Emelia Oko, Peter Onwudingo (Calabar, Nigeria: Heinemann Nigeria, 1992); Konaté, Sié. *La littérature d'enfance et de jeunesse en Afrique noire francophone: Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire et Sénégal: L'impérialisme culturel à travers la production et la distribution du livre pour enfants* (Ph.D thesis, Université Laval, 1993), and *Matatu: Preserving the Landscape of Imagination: Children's Literature in Africa* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997).

3. Mary Galbraith, "Hear My Cry: A Manifesto for an Emancipatory Childhood Studies Approach to Children's Literature," *The Lion and the Unicorn* 25.2 (2001): 190. Susan J. Rasmussen argues along similar lines in "The Poetics of Childhood and Politics of Resistance in Tuareg Society: Some Thoughts on Studying the 'Other' and Adult-Child Relationships," *Ethos* 22.3 (1994): 343-372.

4. Quote from François Piétri (1937) in William Cohen, "The Colonized as Child: British and French Colonial Rule," *African Historical Studies* 3.2 (1970): 427. It is important to note that he, like other scholars, focuses primarily on the upper classes and the colonial administrative class. In practice, class issues that he and others do not broach would have had an impact on the implementation of these policies.

5. Alice L. Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895-1930* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997): 6.

6. "Dans bien des cas, les enfants furent oubliés par les agents recenseurs--et comme il n'y avait pas de contrôle technique, les erreurs mettaient bien des mois ou années à être décelées." Raymond Gervais, "Etat colonial et savoir démographique en A.O.F., 1904-1960," *A.O.F.: Réalités et héritages: Sociétés ouest-africaines et ordre colonial, 1895-1960* (Dakar: Direction des Archives du Sénégal, 1997): 969.

7. Janós Riesz, "La jeunesse en Afrique et l'avenir du continent africain dans la littérature coloniale de langue française, 1919-1939," *Les jeunes en Afrique: Evolution et rôle (XIXe au Xxe siècles)*, eds. Hélène d'Almeida-Topor, Cathérine Coquéry-Vidrovitch, Odile Goerg, Françoise Guitart (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1992. Vol. 1): 57.

8. Gouverneur-Général Brévié, letter to the Director of Political Affairs at the Ministry of the Colonies, 25 June 1935. Archives du Sénégal, 2H13 (26).

9. Richard Roberts, "Marital Instability, Child Custody Disputes, and Social Change in the French Soudan, 1905-1912," unpublished paper presented at the Symposium on Law, Colonialism, and Control Over Children (16 May 1997, Stanford University): 15. For information about the recent history of the customary tribunal, see Bohmer, Carol. "Community Values, Domestic Tranquility and Customary Law in Upper Volta," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 16 (1978): 295-310 and "Modernization, Divorce and the Status of Women: Le Tribunal Coutumier in Bobo Dioulasso," *African Studies Review* 23/2 (1980): 81-90.

10. See the extensive records in the Archives de l'A.O.F. in Dakar: Série H Santé, 1H 102/163 Protection maternelle et infantile; 1H103 (163) Protection maternelle et infantile, and 2H 13 (26) Protection de l'enfance.

11. See also Jane Turriffin, "Colonial Midwives and Modernizing Childbirth in French West Africa," *Women in African Colonial Histories*, eds. Jean Allman, Susan Geiger and Nakanyike Musisi (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 2002): 71-94. Turriffin's article focuses on African midwives and their education.

12. In contrast, the role[s] of Frenchwomen in North Africa in general, and in colonial Algeria in particular have received extended attention in the literature, probably because Algeria was a settler colony. See for example Patricia Lorcin, "Sex, Gender and Race in the Colonial Novels of Elissa Rhais and Lucienne Favre," *The Color of Liberty: Histories of Race in France*. Ed. Sue Peabody and Tyler Stovall (Durham: Duke UP, 2003: 108-130), and, for an overview, Sakina Messaadi, *Les romancières coloniales et la femme colonisée. Contribution à une étude de la littérature coloniale en Algérie dans la première moitié du Xxe siècle* (Algiers: Entreprise nationale du livre 1990). I believe that extended research on the diaries and novels written by French women about their colonial experiences in French West Africa would be fruitful.

13. Cordell and Gregory mention this form of passive resistance as the most widespread tactic in Upper Volta 1914-1939. See Cordell and Gregory, "Labour Reservoirs and Population: French Colonial Policy in Koudougou, Upper Volta, 1914-1939," *Journal of African History* 23.2 (1982): 220. The most comprehensive study of overt resistance in the region is that of Mahir Saul, *West African Challenge to Empire: Culture and History in the Volta-Bani Anti-Colonial War* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2001).

14. Amalie Sanon, Bobo-Dioulasso July 1998, personal communication.

15. Y. Désiré Maïga, "L'enseignement colonial en Haute-Volta de 1920 à 1932" (Mémoire de maîtrise, Université Cheikh Anta Diop de Dakar, 1972): 41. See also Malidoma Somé's autobiography, *Of Water and the Spirit* (New York: Putnam, 1994). For an overview of education in French colonies that focuses on the curriculum, see Gail Kelly, "The Presentation of Indigenous Society in the Schools of French West Africa and Indochina, 1918-1938," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26.3 (1984): 523-542.

16. Bhabha, Homi, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," *Modern Literary Theory: A Reader*, eds. Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh (London: Edward Arnold, 1989): 234-241.

17. For details on the elites' position see Bonnie Campbell, "Social Change and Class Formation in a French West African State," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 8.2 (1974): 285-306. She writes of Vichy policy, "Now even those who had become naturalized were treated as common African subjects" (299). At the time, Upper Volta no longer existed as a colony; its territories were parceled out to the colonies of Côte d'Ivoire, Niger and Soudan 1933-1947 (Upper Volta was reassembled in 1947).

18. For one famous French approach to this colonialist irony, see Jean-Paul Sartre's preface to Frantz Fanon's *Les damnés de la terre* (Paris: Maspéro, 1961).

19. See Charles Ward, "United Nations Work in Africa," *African Affairs* 54.216 (1955): 213.

20. Conklin 155.

21. Letter from Minister Sarraut to Governor General Carde, 3 January 1924. Archives du Sénégal, Série 2H13 (26).

22.. For a discussion of the see-sawing between association and assimilation, see François Manchuelle, "Assimilés ou patriotes africains ? Naissance du nationalisme culturel en Afrique française (1853-1931)," *Cahiers d'études africaines* 138.139 (1995) : 333-368.

23. Richard Roberts, "Marital Instability, Child Custody Disputes, and Social Change in the French Soudan, 1905-1912," (Unpublished paper presented at the Symposium on Law, Colonialism, and Control

Over Children, 16 May 1997, Stanford University): 21. See also *Les jeunes en Afrique: Evolution et rôle (XIXe au XXe siècles)*, eds. Hélène d'Alméida-Topor, Cathérine Coquery-Vidrovitch, Odile Goerg, & Françoise Guitart (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1992) for descriptions of that "cognitive template."

24. *Exposition coloniale internationale de 1931. La Haute Volta*. Paris: Société d'Éditions Géographiques, Maritimes et Coloniales, 1931.

25. 2G51 (78), Circular no. 29, 4/S from Louis Rollin to the Governors General of the Colonies.

26. Cordell and Gregory (209-210) discuss the issue of child head tax, remarking that the data on children are particularly unreliable. No note is made of the issue of schooling, or of age determination. See Gervais and archival material for a more complete discussion of these issues.

27. 2G51 (78), Note no. 986SE/9, Dakar 21 May 1935.

28. Cordell and Gregory, 223-224.

29. See Ki-Zerbo, Joseph. "Statuts et conditions de vie de l'enfant à travers l'histoire africaine," Séminaire sous-régional sur la convention des droits de l'enfant (Dakar, 1988) and Riesman, Paul. "The Person and the Life Cycle in African Social Life and Thought," *African Studies Review* 29.2 (1986).

30. Amadé Badini, *Naître et grandir chez les Moosé traditionnels*, Découvertes du Burkina (Paris: Sépia-ADDB, 1994).

31. Sanou, Jacques. *Importance des pratiques traditionnelles de socialisation et d'enculturation de la jeunesse rurale en Haute-Volta. Exemple des jeunes Bobo-fing dans le département des Hauts-Bassins, 1960-1982*, Mémoire de Diplôme des Hautes Etudes Pratiques Sociales (Lyon, 1983).

32. Alma Gottlieb, "Where Have All the Babies Gone? Toward an Anthropology of Infants and Their Caretakers," *Anthropological Quarterly* 73.3 (2000): 121-132.

33. Oger Kaboré, "Les chansons d'enfants Moose: signification socio-culturelle d'un mode d'expression des jeunes filles en milieu rural," *Cultures sonores d'Afrique*, ed. Junzo Kawada (Tokyo: Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, Tokyo U of Foreign Studies, 1997): 144.

34. Ibid 131.

35. For an extended analysis of the *zaka*, see Marta Rohatynskyj, "Women's Virtue and the Structure of the Mossi Zaka," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 22.3 (1988): 528-551.

36. Rohatynskyj 535.

37. Rohatynskyj 536-537.

38. Rohatynskyj 537.

39. Hinckley, Priscilla Baird. "The Dodo Masquerade of Burkina Faso," *African Arts* 19/2 (1986): 74-77.

40. Compaoré 1997.

41. Badini, 34. Badini goes so far as to say of women that they have a "unique raison de vivre: procréer" [a single reason for living: to procreate]. Certainly, this is only one person's interpretation of Mossi cultural values; however, the fact that he underlines the importance of women's reproductive role in this way indicates that sex does indeed determine childhood experiences to a great degree, perhaps as much as age.

42. Rohatynskyj, 547.

43. Denise Bouche, *L'enseignement dans les territoires français de l'Afrique occidentale de 1817 à 1920: Mission civilisatrice ou formation d'une élite?* Ph.D thesis, U of Paris I (Lille: U of Lille P, 1974).

44. Diane Barthel, "Women's Educational Experience Under Colonialism: Toward a Diachronic Model," *Signs* 7.1 (1985): 137-154. See Gertrude Mianda, "Colonialism, Education, and Gender Relations in the Belgian Congo: The *Évolué* Case," *Women in African Colonial Histories*, ed. Jean

Allman, Susan Geiger & Nakanyikie Musisi (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2002): 144-163 for a discussion of Belgian policies similar to those of the French.

45. Turriffin 72.

46. Turriffin 72.

47. Quoted in Turriffin 78. See Aoua Kéïta, *Femme d'Afrique* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1975) for the full text.

48. Rasmussen 347.

49. I agree with Philippe Ariès' thesis in *L'enfant et la vie familiale sous l'Ancien Régime* (Paris: Seuil, 1973) that childhood is a socio-historical construct.

50. Governor Angoulvant wrote, in his *La pacification de la Côte d'Ivoire*, that "il faudra que nos sujets viennent au progrès malgré eux, comme certains enfants acquièrent l'éducation en dépit de leur répugnance au travail. Nous devons jouer vis-à-vis de l'indigène le rôle de parents jeunes et volontaires et c'est à l'autorité à obtenir ce qui serait refusé par les persuasions." Cited in Kambou-Ferrand, Jeanne-Marie, *Peuples voltaïques et conquête coloniale, 1885-1914. Burkina Faso* (Paris: ACCT/L'Harmattan, 1993): 392.

51. For information about codes and laws concerning the use of French, see Turcotte, Denis and Hélène Aubé, *Lois règlements et textes administratifs sur l'usage des langues en Afrique Occidentale Française (1826-1959). Répertoire chronologique annoté* (Laval: Presses de l'Université de Laval, 1983).