

REVIEW ESSAY

Where Do We Go from Here?: Writing Children into African History

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Saheed Aderinto, ed. 2015. *Children and Childhood in Colonial Nigerian Histories*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 235 pp.

Abosedo A. George. 2014. *Making Modern Girls: A History of Girlhood, Labor, and Social Development in Colonial Lagos*. Athens: Ohio University Press. 301 pp.

Since Philippe Ariès' groundbreaking *Centuries of Childhood*, few historians of Africa have ventured into the study of the history of childhood. The publication of the two volumes reviewed here addresses this deficit. *Children and Childhood in Colonial Nigerian Histories* brings together eight essays exploring juvenile delinquents, child abduction, children's masquerade, child labor, girl hawkers, and even the Boy Scouts. For Saheed Aderinto, assistant professor of history at Western Carolina University, this collection highlights many of the factors that converged to make childhood in colonial Africa a unique experience. Although location and socioeconomic class significantly shaped identity formation in colonial Nigeria, geographic mobility and multiculturalism added to these processes among children. In addition, race and color affected colonial notions of childhood, as foreign children also grew up in the colony. Lastly, childhood was gendered, because adults perceived both the upbringing and future of boys and girls differently.

In *Making Modern Girls*, Abosedo George, associate professor of history and Africana studies at Barnard College, investigates the relationship between girls who worked as street hawkers and ideas of both girlhood and juvenile welfare in colonial Lagos. Over seven chapters, George argues that children were central to discussions about what it meant to be modern and urban in Lagos between the 1920s and 1950s, because adults projected their fears, desires, and visions of an ideal society onto the children they raised. At the heart of this monograph is the issue of urban citizenship. The debates surrounding girl hawkers and girlhood were essentially expressions of what it meant to be a modern urban person. In the eyes of elite local women, girlhood was a period of preparation for the domestic life of Christian womanhood. Their "schoolgirl" vision of girlhood, however, conflicted with the Yoruba vision of girlhood. In Yoruba society, hawking functioned as an extension of household chores, giving it an important place in girls' social development. Girl hawkers, then, were either immoral girls who stood in opposition to innocence, modesty, and chastity, or they embodied important Yoruba values—a

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strong work ethic, respect for elders, and an appreciation for economic independence. Both of these positions reflect specific, opposing notions about being and becoming modern in colonial Lagos.

While the two books under consideration raise valuable questions about how childhood has been defined in colonial Nigeria, the issue of sources demands attention. Primary sources remain the greatest barrier to examining childhood in the narrative of African history—and herein lies both the greatest strength and weakness of Aderinto's edited volume and George's monograph. The two works locate children in the archives, providing direction and suggesting realms of inquiry to historians who do not want to mine vast archival collections for references to children. Nigerian children are not absent from the written archives. They can be found in newspapers, autobiographical writings, government publications, and colonial records, including the Colony Welfare Office and the Boy Scouts Association. Aderinto's essays on representations of childhood in the Nigerian press (Chapter 1) and on the memory of childhood in autobiographical writings (Chapter 7) further explicate the limitations of such written materials. By laying the groundwork for future research, George and Aderinto and his contributors assist the next generation of Africanists to undertake the history of childhood.

These texts demonstrate the limits of current research methods for writing the history of childhood in Africa, but their authors do not explicitly address this problem. While children are the topic of some documents found in the archives, children composed few written materials suited to historical research. More often than not, primary sources reveal adults discussing children as passive objects, found in relation to organizing ideas such as labor, crime, and education. The nature of archival references to children shaped how the authors and contributors of both books write about children. Rather than placing children's experience at the center of their narratives, they prioritize the relationship of childhood to modernity. George investigates the place of girl hawkers in the salvationist agenda of educated elite women reformers and the developmental agenda of the colonial state. Adam Paddock looks at Igbo Boy Scouts in Nigeria between 1934 and 1951 in relation to ideas about education and the imperial civilizing mission (Aderinto, Chapter 5). Simon Heap uses the rehabilitation of juvenile delinquents at the Salvation Army's Boys' Industrial Home to determine whether or not colonialists processed children as a uniform entity, at least within the context of juvenile crime (Aderinto, Chapter 2). In other cases, children are missing from the narrative entirely—despite finding their way into the chapter title. Tokunbo Ayoola's essay on child laborers in Nigerian tin mines in the 1950s is not even about children in tin mines, but rather about why colonial officials never banned child labor (Aderinto, Chapter 6).

Despite focusing on defining childhood's relationship to broader themes, some of these historians find space to explore the experiences of the child. The primacy of the experience of the child is, to be sure, contingent on which sources the authors marshaled in their research. Children are absent from Ayoola's narrative, because he bases his essay on a traditional reading of sources written by colonial officials. Thus, children are only important to this essay as the object of the debate between colonial officials and their critics. George, on the other hand, supplements her archival research with interviews she conducted in 2005 and 2006 with elderly women who had been street hawkers in Lagos between the 1930s and 1950s. Similarly, Aderinto makes the most of childhood memories in his essay on autobiographical writings (Chapter 7).

Utilizing memory brings George and Aderinto closer to the immediacy of experience than Ayoola, but their children nonetheless remain voiceless. Instead, the elderly women whom these hawkers became speak on behalf of their younger selves through the interviews George conducted with them more than fifty years after childhood's end. Aderinto's memoirs suffer from a similar problem—the authors speak for the children they once were. The perils of memory are well known to historians, but how time or an autobiographer's political agenda might have warped these memories must be left to speculation. In short, memory is no substitute for primary sources composed by children—rare as these might be.

The history of children cannot be told apart from the history of adults, but if childhood is going to become indispensable to the narrative of African history the emphasis must be placed on children themselves. How can historians make up for the shortcomings of written records when (adult or child) informants or documents written by children themselves are not available? For Simon Heap, the answer is to apply sociological principles. In his essay on the Salvation Army's boys' home in Lagos, Heap uses labeling theory and social control theory to help explain the behavior of problem youths (Aderinto, Chapter 2).¹ While sociology presents one option for historians of childhood who seek to supplement the limitations of current archival materials, another option may be to explore the senses of children in African history, to borrow Moses Ochonu's concept.² Ochonu proposed sensing as a way to rethink the writing of postcolonial African history, but historians could similarly feel, hear, smell, and taste their way into colonial childhood by looking at the often ignored forces that animated the lives of children. If we cannot learn specifically about children from children, as Uyilawa Usuanlele did in his essay on children's masquerade in Benin City (Aderinto, Chapter 3), historians may be able to learn about their diet, or to speculate about the enriched sensory impact of being raised in a place like Lagos—crowded, unsanitary, noisy, extravagantly stimulating. By sensing the forces that animate the lives of children beyond organizing principles such as labor, education, and crime, scholars may be able to place more emphasis on children's experience in their research.

Historians could also engage with archival materials in a more fruitful and creative manner if they thought consciously about when colonial childhood began and ended. While Aderinto briefly addresses the issue of chronology and childhood in the introduction and his chapter on the Nigerian press (pp. 4, 22), the majority of his contributors do not attempt to define a specific period of life as childhood, or distinguish children from youth in any of their essays. George notes various definitions of childhood throughout her monograph (pp. 110, 139), but readers nonetheless miss what it means to be a girl child hawker versus a girl youth hawker because these nuances are lost in her discussion of girlhood. The distinction between child, youth, and adult is worth stating clearly in future research, as it will allow for a more effective analysis of primary sources.

Aderinto's edited volume and George's monograph make valuable contributions to our knowledge of childhood in Africa, especially in their examination of the relationship between Nigerian children and modernity. Future historians seeking to reconstruct the history of childhood in Africa, however, must emphasize children in their own right, and move beyond the well tread frameworks used to discuss adults. Retrieving children from the annals of African history will require great ingenuity and methodological innovation. In the absence of

primary sources written by children, historians will need to use a little imagination to capture their unique world. There is still a long way to go, but *Children and Childhood in Colonial Nigerian Histories* and *Making Modern Girls* mark two steps in the right direction.

Notes

- 1 Labeling theory claims “if a juvenile is said to be delinquent he or she will think of himself or herself in that way and act accordingly” (Aderinto, p. 53). Social control theory declares “delinquency is more pronounced for youths who have lost their desire for achievement and recognition” (Aderinto, p. 54).
- 2 Moses E. Ochonu. 2015. “Elusive History: Fractured Archives, Politicized Orality, and Sensing the Postcolonial Past.” *History in Africa* 42: 287-98.