

The Fears And Anxieties Of Delinquent Yoruba Children

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One of the first Yoruba phrases I learnt was 'Èru ba mi'—'I am afraid'. I learnt it because it was so frequently said to me by the young delinquents who appeared before the Lagos Juvenile Court, either on criminal charges, or as in need of care and protection, or as beyond parental control. Boys and girls from the age of six to sixteen years would suddenly exclaim: 'I am afraid'. Of what are these children afraid? How does one find out the content of these fears and what is the effect upon these children?

Delinquent children in America and Europe are basically fear-ridden and over-anxious, and the Yoruba delinquent child shows similar characteristics. In some cases, it is possible to ask children the direct question, 'Of what are you afraid?', and they will mention their fears, one after the other, often showing considerable insight into the cause of those fears. Less introspective children cannot thus catalogue their fears, but after they have gained confidence in the listener, they can be asked to talk about their life at home, at school and on the streets, and while thus talking, they will include experiences which make them afraid. Others will tell stories and dramatize scenes and, in so doing, project their own fears and anxieties on to the children in the stories. In describing their fearful dreams and nightmares, and their visions of people already dead, these children make their anxieties known to the adult listener. Lastly, the Yoruba delinquent often prays, and in recounting his prayers, he often mentions the situations which are fearful for him and from which he prays for deliverance. By these methods, the child's fears are known.

The fears described in these pages are listed approximately with regard to the intensity of feeling displayed by the child. One cannot count up fears and conclude that those mentioned the most frequently are therefore the most important to the children. It is only possible to make a subjective judgment and to state that when speaking of certain fears, a child shows more emotion than when speaking of others.

Undoubtedly the greatest fear of these Yoruba delinquents is that of being harmed by the witchcraft of their fathers' wives, especially in cases where their own mothers are no longer living with their fathers. It is through the food given to him which has been prepared by the stepmother that the child expects harm to come and many children beg their fathers to give them money, if their mothers are not in the house to feed them, so that they may buy all their food outside the home. Many fathers agree, thus reinforcing in the child's mind his own suspicions. The jealousies of the polygamous home further strengthen the child's fears. The frequently affirmed belief that only a mother will care for her children means that any stepmother is viewed with

hostility. One schoolboy of fifteen years of age who was a persistent absconder from home, just wandering off without any warning and staying away from home for two or three weeks at a time, related how when he was small, his father brought a second wife into the home. His mother left the father because of this and went to live in another town. Shortly after her departure, the boy fell ill and his mother visited him. She then consulted a native doctor who stated that the new wife was a witch, who was sucking the life-blood of the boy so that he would never be fit and well. His father refused to believe this story, but eventually the boy was sent to live elsewhere. The boys then said that the witch would come to him in his dreams and tell him to do bad things and would threaten to harm his mother. She would repeatedly tell him to run to meet her at a certain place, and he would feel compelled to leave whatever he was doing and to meet her there. He never met her, but continued to go, because if he disobeyed her, she would make him sick. Another boy of the same age related that his mother warned him that his father's new wife, dressed in white, chasing him down the street. Other children are afraid of being poisoned as a result of eating food definitely prepared to harm them, or to harm some other person in the family. A fifteen-year-old lad gave a long and detailed story of the attempts made by his father and his paternal uncle to poison him, and when that was unsuccessful, the paternal uncle, at the father's request, had taken him out hunting and tried to shoot him. Another smaller boy described how he never dared to eat in his mother's room, because she was unfaithful to his father and his father had warned him that he must never eat food prepared by her, as she and her lovers might be trying to poison the father, and the boy might eat the food by mistake. Other children are warned never to eat at the home of one parent, lest they are poisoned. Some children take such prohibitions in a matter-of-fact way, but other children are obsessed by the fear that they may one day thoughtlessly eat and be harmed in this way. The person whom the child fears as likely to harm him is nearly always someone within the family, or at least living within the family house. Children interpret their dreams as warnings of possible evil and expect that the happenings of the dream will come to pass. For example, one boy was very worried because he dreamt that his father took him to a marriage ceremony, then on to the beach, where he pushed him into the ocean so that the sea carried him away.

Many delinquents attribute their misdeeds to their carrying out the orders of Eşu. The majority relate how they hear two voices—one telling them to do bad things, and the other voice telling them to do good things. The voice encouraging bad actions is frequently attributed to Eşu, but in a number of cases, the child will say that his heart (oƷkan) or his spirit (eşmi) tells him what to do. However described, there is always a conflict, and the evil force always

wins. Typical remarks are such as these of two boys, aged twelve and thirteen years respectively: 'It is Eṣu who is responsible for my running away. At times, I would be sitting down when Eṣu would tell me to do bad things, whilst my heart (ọkan) would forbid me to do these things. I cannot refuse to do what Eṣu commands'; 'Something is worrying me which prevents me behaving well, although I want to. I hear a voice telling me to do bad things and I must always obey. I have never disobeyed. The voice worries me everywhere. It is worrying me to run away. The voice usually tells me to steal my mother's things. It also tells me where other people keep their things for me to steal. I have never told anyone about this before'.

Many delinquent children; both boys and girls, are regarded by their parents as 'abiku' children, who have been born and have died many times. One boy of thirteen years was said by his father to have been spoiled because he died nine times before he finally agreed to stay on earth. Such children will describe how their child companions in the world from which they come speak to them, urging them to run away or to steal. Some children make capital of this, insisting that feasts must be provided for their companions-in which they and their earthly friends take part, or they will be called back to heaven. Others threaten to leave home, and return to heaven, if they are not given new clothes when they ask for them. Others are, however, afraid of their companions. For example, one boy described that he was being worried by his companions; he left his clothes in the house, and then came back and found the companions had put them outside; he went to sleep in one place and woke up to find himself in another. In his dreams, they put chains around his neck and pull him around.

Children whose parents or siblings have died frequently show intense fear that they will be called to join the dead people. The children demonstrate how widespread is the belief that those who die young are unhappy and are wandering around trying to call their relatives to join them. They describe how they meet their dead relatives in the streets or in the compound at night, or report that they frequently have terrifying dreams about them. A girl of eleven years was admitted to the Remand Home as she frequently absconded from home. During the day-time, she sat and wept; at night she would not sleep but ran about. She said that at night she was called by a woman in white, who beckoned to her through the window, and if she fell asleep she would wake suddenly, feeling that someone was trying to hold and kill her. She said she wept so much because she was always frightened and had been so since her brother, a schoolboy, was killed, as he at food offered to him by his uncle's wife, and died. She dreamt that this brother was offering her food and calling her to join him. She said she believed a dead person could call a live one

to join him. She did not know how he would do I, nor how she could protect herself. She added: 'I do not want to die'.

Not all the fears of children are so ethereal! They are also terrified of being beaten, both by their parents or guardians at home and their teachers at school, and of being given other forms of corporal punishment. Some children doubtless accept the beatings in a philosophical spirit, but nearly all delinquents are so frightened of any form of corporal punishment that when once they know that they have done wrong, or have committed some offense such as breaking a plate for which they know they will be punished, they do not wait to suffer, but immediately abscond, often picking up money on the way out of the house with which to feed themselves for the next few days when living on the streets. Many children have cause to be afraid. Not only are they caned, often being tied hand and foot first, but they may have pepper rubbed into their eyes, their hands cut with razor blades and pepper or some other irritant rubbed into the open wound, made to hold their hands in the fire, or even tied to the rafters of the roof and left. If not tied or held down, the child may be prancing around the room while he is being beaten, with the result that the stick may strike him across the eyes or ears. These punishments are not inflicted by adults who are intentionally or actively cruel, but the normal adult is so incensed by frequent delinquencies, the causes of which he does not understand at all, that he genuinely that only severer punishment will deter the child. Finally, in despair, the adult realizes that his punishments are not in any way deterring the child, whose delinquencies continue to increase so that he either gives up completely and allows the child to live on the streets or he brings the child to the Welfare Office. By this time, the child's habit of absconding whenever trouble is likely to ensue is firmly fixed, and his fears are so deep-seated that they take a great deal of eradicating.

'I have my mother' said a boy of twelve, 'because she handed me over to a woman in the north, who made great cuts in my hand to stop me running away'. 'I always abscond after I have been flogged' said another boy, 'lest my guardian should again become angry and flog me a second time'. 'I hate my mother, because she flogs me a second time'. 'I hate my mother, because she flogs me so often', said a boy of twelve years. 'When I steal', said a small girl of ten years, 'my father flogs me' he says he is ready to kill me and then will throw me into a pit. I feel he can do this and I am greatly afraid'. Mothers report how the fathers beat the children for every mistake, and draw attention to the scars on the children's bodies, while fathers also report that the mothers are too hot-tempered and do not know when to stop beating the children.

Many children, especially those who are mentally dull or particularly restless, truant from school because they are afraid of being beaten at school. Many are beaten because they do not know their lessons, and others who stay

away from school one day, are then too terrified to return, knowing they will be beaten. Others are perhaps detained to do work at home, on finding they have arrived late at school, dare not enter for fear of the punishment, so they take to the streets. One little boy of nine years said he went to church on Sundays to pray that he might know his lessons so that he might not be caned by his teacher. 'I am afraid, very much, of being caned', he added. Another twelve-year-old boy said, 'I am very upset when I get "nought" in Arithmetic, because I know the head-teacher will can me'. But of all the corporal punishment given in the schools, that resented the most by the child is when the teacher canes him at his parent's request for misdeeds committed at home. The child feels this is not fair. He is doubly resentful when the teacher accepts payment for it!

There is one kind of flogging which the child fears and dreams about a good deal, and that is being chased and whipped by the Egunguns. It is interesting that many children dream that they are being chased by Egunguns and Igunnu masqueraders. A boy, aged sixteen, said he persistently dreamt that he was being chased and in and out of sheds, until he finds a place where he can hide.

Many delinquents abscond from their homes and may spend several nights sleeping on the streets before they return home, join up with other youngsters who have also run away from home, or before they are picked up by adult thieves and persuaded to join their gangs. When alone or in twos or threes, the children are usually frightened that they may be kidnapped and killed for medicine. They have been told that children who sleep away from home may thus be caught, and sometimes pay an adult to let them sleep under his protection. One ten-year-old boy said he had absconded from home when he heard that a human sacrifice was wanted and that small children were asked to stay indoors. He was attacked by a man but rescued by another man who claimed him as his son. Whether there is any objective foundation for the child's fears is unimportant; the fact remains that the child hears so many stories of children being kidnapped that he believes it and fears accordingly.

Snakes and animals are also mentioned by children in connection with their fears. 'I am afraid of snakes', said one child, 'because they eat children'. Snakes also figure frequently in their frightening dreams. Motor accidents are also dreamt about and feared actually. Many children have seen bad accidents or have relatives who had died as a result of them, and prayers for deliverance from accidents seem to be usually included in the religious services of the churches which the children attend.

Many delinquents show fears which center around a 'guilty conscience'. The fear may be a practical one, that the people from whom they steal may be making bad medicine against the thief which will then work on them, or

that the people may have curse the thief. Children attending Mission schools frequently stress that they are afraid of hell, its torments being described by them in very vivid imagery. They also fear that their thefts may be found out and that the losers will report them to their parents and they will be punished. One small thief related how he used to lie awake at night thinking that any passer-by was a person from whom he had stolen who had come to report him. Others feel that they might inadvertently have stolen from a witch who would certainly take revenge. With at least half of them, their fears do not center around being found out and punished, but they are genuinely frightened of what will become of them in the future. They feel that they cannot stop stealing however much they try; they want to be good, but fear they will always be bad. They have lost confidence in their own ability to reform, and this is often at the root of their very strong sense of anxiety and fear.

Fear of the police is not frequently expressed. These delinquents are, in any case, more outlaws from the family than outlaws from society. They fear the rejection of their parents above everything else. When first brought to us, they often show very strong fear, some crying hysterically and shrieking at the top of their voices. This is not surprising when one hears the dreadful tales which the parents have told the children about the treatment which will be meted out to them if they are taken to the Juvenile Court—they are told they will all be beaten every day, whether they have done wrong or not, that they will be starved and made to work all day and even not allowed to sleep!

What are the results of these fears upon the children? It is particularly distressing that in Yoruba beliefs, it is usually the person within the family circle who is likely to harm by medicine or witchcraft. About ninety percent of our children come from homes, broken either by the death or separation of the parents, and the broken home is the place where fears of bad medicine and witchcraft can most easily find root. The child's need for security within his family circle, if he is to develop satisfactorily, is now widely recognized. Yoruba children suffer greatly in that their anxieties and fears are centered round the home, thus depriving them of that basic security which they, like all children, need above everything else.

It will have been noticed how the child's fears are centered round the harm that can be done to him—not by impersonal powers or elements of nature, or animals—but primarily by people alive and dead, and this results in his losing faith in the goodwill and kindness of people. His self-confidence is lessened thereby; he tends to withdraw from the society of people who can thus harm him. A few delinquents react to this threat to their security by aggressive action against people, but usually, the delinquent retreats from people who have such power to harm him. They are introverts, not extroverts.

Many delinquents have lost one or both parents. In polygamous life, where an aged man may take a young wife and rear a family, it is obvious that there must be many children whose fathers die before their mothers. Such children definitely receive less material care than others, but also many of their parents have died when they were young or middle-aged. The Yoruba beliefs about the fate of such people mean that death has no comforting features; such young parents are not envisaged as being protected and looked after by God, but of wandering about, unhappy and spiteful. The child who thus loses his young parent is debarred from building up in phantasy any picture to bring him solace. Dreams of dead people are also interpreted usually as signifying that the dead person is wishing to call the children away. Thus the shock of being deprived of parental care, which any child feels normally, is enhanced for Yoruba children by these unsettling factors of belief.

The Yoruba parent sometimes pets and wheedles his child; sometimes he prepares protective medicine and sacrifices for him. But on the whole, discipline rests primarily on inculcating fear in the child. The harsh methods of punishment thus create the very delinquencies which they are attempting to cure. Many a child, upset by some disturbance within the home at an age when he is not able to cope with it, becomes delinquent, but if more toleration were shown within the family circle, many would again adjust themselves to the demands of the family as regards good conduct. But the very severe measures taken to check the delinquency only makes the child feel more insecure, arguing, as he does, that parents or relatives who punish him thus cruelly cannot really love and care for him. Many a child who runs away from home impulsively would return if it were not for fear of the beating which he knows he will receive. The frustrations, fears and punishments within the home are often more than the child can bear, and he develops the habit of evading difficulties by lying, absconding and stealing, instead of gradually gaining confidence that he can overcome the troubles with a little effort.

The effect of fear upon the mental development of children is very marked. At present, there is no test of intelligence designed for West African children, but taking the child's progress at school as a criterion, many who make no progress at all because they are frightened at home and at school, if removed to an institution where discipline is not based on fear, will show very marked improvement. Children who have been turned out of school because 'they cannot learn'-according to their teachers-even become first in the class. This mental retardation as a result of fear and anxiety is a very serious factor in child development.

These are the fears of delinquent children and the effect those fears have upon them. It would be interesting to know how far these fears and effects are true of the child life of Yorubaland in general.

