

## Children's Work in Africa

**Veranstalter:** International Research Center „Work and Human Lifecycle in Global History“, Humboldt-University Berlin

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**Bericht von:** Martin Rempe, Freie Universität Berlin

On hearing the notion of child work, most people expect information and statements about exploitation systems and perhaps some advice on how to fight against these. Indeed, there is no doubt that children are being exploited through work in almost all parts of the world and especially in Africa. But as Convenor GERD SPITTLER (Bayreuth) pointed out in his introduction to the workshop „Children's work in Africa“, held at the International Research Center „Work and Human Lifecycle in Global History“ (Humboldt-University Berlin), exploitation is only one dimension of child work amongst others. According to Spittler, the strong association of children's work with exploitation reflects the dominant perception in the Western world in general and more particular the view of Western-oriented international organizations like the International Labour Organization (ILO). Against this backdrop the workshop's aim was to move beyond these Western perspectives and to conceptualize children's work from the bottom up by focusing on the children's agency and their self-perceptions at work. Additionally, Spittler argued in favor of a systematic differentiation and analytical comparison between children's work in capitalist and non capitalist societies.

During the two-day workshop, twelve papers, mostly contributed by ethnologists, were presented. In general, they demonstrated the richness of this broad approach towards children's work and at the same time documented the need for comprehensive research on this subject beyond the exploitation complex that has so far dominated the literature. The first three contributions focused on the relationship between working and learning. In her portrayal of a family peasant economy in Mali, BARBARA POLAK (Bayreuth) showed that Bamana peasants' children consider their participation in the family's work-

ing life a privilege. Polak argued that parents would let their children work on distinct working tasks only if they considered them sufficiently reliable to do so. In the Bamana peasant world, this focus on reliability of their children counteracts the economic rationality of exploitation systems. In fact the children are cautiously brought close to their prospective work activities.

Similarly, IRIS KÖHLER (Remseck) in her presentation of children of the Northern Ivory Coast making pottery drew a positive picture of this kind of child work: Her field study of the pottery economy in the small village Sangopari, run by women only, revealed that young girls mainly learn making pots by voluntary and casual observation. Thus, child work was characterized as a normal part of everyday life and at the same time as a natural learning process within the family economy. DAVID LANCY (Utah) somewhat radicalized these case studies in his general statement on „The limited role of teaching in children's acquisition of the tools for survival“: He argued that in African villages learning without teaching would be the norm, and that (coercive) teaching would not be necessary in order to become a competent adult in an African village. According to Lancy, the chore curriculum for children (milking, fishing, farming, running errands etc.) provides for useful learning in informal structures, whereas formal teaching seems to be a rather superfluous interference in everyday rural life.

Discussant KURT BECK (Bayreuth) then raised the question whether the „tools for survival“ were the only kind of knowledge children should ideally learn. In the ensuing general discussion there were some warnings not to romanticize or idealize „good old“ African native village structures. Notwithstanding these qualified objections, it became evident that children's work in Africa to a certain extent serves as a substitute for absent learning institutions and is therefore a central component of adolescence in rural Africa.

Later on the tensions and differences between child work in capitalist and subsistence economies were focused on. First of all, Gerd Spittler in his theoretically well-founded talk on the Kel Ewey Tuareg in Niger highlighted a special type of an open family economy which

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engages in long-distance trading with other family economies. Accordingly, these caravaneers do not perceive themselves as (capitalist) traders, but rather as members of a household trying to maintain their traditional economic environment. Drawing on early theoretical work by Karl Blücher, Karl Kautsky and Alexander Chayanov, Spittler shed some light on the importance of child work for the upkeep of these open family economies. He showed that formal schooling was not necessary for the Kel Ewey as long as the caravaneers did not come in touch with the state bureaucracy. In sum, Spittler supported the view that especially in certain African societies, children benefit from work which therefore can be acknowledged as one form of education.

In the following presentation CINDI KATZ (New York) pointed to the negative effects of an agricultural development project in a Sudanese village. The project aimed at integration of the villagers into the market economy. She argued that the children's engagement in this cash crop project considerably increased their work-load and deprived them of their traditional perception of work as a mixture of playing and learning. Consequently and in contrast to the commonly assumed time-space compression triggered by globalization, her global perspective revealed some sort of a time-space extension: Children had to work more and cover greater distances in order to fulfill their duties in both capitalist and domestic economic systems. In general, Katz' presentation reflected the numerous difficulties accompanying the imposition of a completely different economic and social system.

Finally MARIA HAHNEKAMP (Halle an der Saale) focused on the handling of child work within neoliberal forms of governance. Her story was about how a German herbal company tried to get a „fair trade“ certificate for hibiscus manufactured by Sudanese young girls in Umm Ruwaba. The company wanted its hibiscus certified according to ILO standards. Hahnekamp's analysis of different legal and moral orders – the national law, the local order with regard to kinship relations as well as the ethical requirements of the company – illustrated the tensions between universal normative claims and local

practices embedded in different cultural values. Thus, it became evident that initiatives of „fair trade“ produce can trigger opposite effects – in this case the danger of Sudanese girls losing their job and familiar surroundings – because they are based on normative convictions of Western consumer society and do not take into account local differences.

Afterwards the relationship between working and schooling was discussed more systematically. JEANNETT MARTIN (Bayreuth) demonstrated in her paper on children's work in Northern Benin that the massive spread of formal schooling in Benin since the 1990s considerably increased girls' work load, because the household duties of children did by no means decline. Consequently, Martin could not identify any clear-cut difference between a working and a schooling childhood. Given the fact that child fosterage is a widespread practice in Northern Benin, conflicts on the distribution of work within the household were not only determined by age and gender, but also by social status and the proximity of kinship relations. Martin concluded that currently the decrease of child fosterage on the one hand, and the continuing schooling campaign on the other hand, heighten the demand for manpower and intensify conflicts within the households of Northern Benin's Fée society. Directly referring to Martin's statement, ERDMUTE ALBER (Bayreuth) analyzed family decision processes about children's future in Northern Benin. Her presentation was about a young boy who was financially able to go to school. Yet his parents decided to take him out of school again. The parents' decision was due to social considerations: they did not want to provide a privilege to their biological son that their fostered children did not have. However, Alber's statistical data clearly showed that in general, fostered children are being significantly less enrolled in school than biological offspring. In her comment, JULIA SEIBERT (Berlin) pointed out that the relationship between work and schooling and the inherent conflict between those having access to school and those who do not is one of the most crucial questions to concentrate on in future research on child work in Africa.

The two presentations of the next section

shifted the focus again in two ways: For one thing, both panelists explicitly talked about child labor and thereby put emphasis on exploitative forms of work. Additionally, this went along with a change of perspective towards urban areas. BEVERLY GRIER (North Carolina) in her historical account of child workers in Colonial Kenya during the 1920s and early 1930s was interested in the unintended consequences of long-distance child labor recruitment. According to her, one of the most significant side-effects of this practice was the drift of children into the towns and cities of the colony. These early „street children“ posed a threat to law and order and hence challenged the colonial state which however was paralyzed between security concerns on the one hand and settler demands for cheap labor on the other. Linking the historical analysis to the present, Grier argued that two features of colonial child labor still persists in today's Kenyan society: the high demand for child labor and the great distances between the children's homelands and their working place.

Subsequently, MARTIN VERLET (Paris/Legon, Accra) in his field study on Nima, a run-down suburb of Ghana's capital Accra, considered the connections between domestic economic deregulation and child labor. He showed that the country's economic crisis, which was mainly due to the structural adjustment programs of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, led to a considerable increase in the employment of child labor in urban areas. Usually pushed by their (desperate) mothers, children in Nima are forced to become „ruthlessly serviceable“, that is ready to render any services ranging from carrying parcels to sexual intercourse, in order to fulfill their new role as household protectors and breadwinners. Discussing these findings, ANDREAS ECKERT (Berlin) warned of simplifications. As regards the Kenyan situation today, he stressed the fact that in contrast to colonial times, labor is currently abundant and land scarce. According to him the dynamics of the crisis in Ghana were also more complex than just direct effects coming from interventions of the 'bad guys' in Washington D.C.

The last panel focused on the legal dimen-

sion of children's work. MANFRED LIEBEL (Berlin) portrayed the „African Movement of Working Children and Youth“ (AMWCY), which was founded in 1994 in Ivory Coast and is currently active in 20 African states. The organization is run exclusively by adolescents (up to the age of 25). However, in the last years, conflicts developed between older and younger members. Regardless of these conflicts, Liebel emphasized how in this way working children became active and organized themselves, engaging in national as well as international debates on child work. He argued that by drawing up a catalog on children's rights, the AMWCY demonstrated their own understanding of children's rights at work, for example the right to stay in the home village of the child which so far is unique within the global legal discourse on children's rights. Liebel concluded that even if children's working movements are still more or less ignored, especially by international organizations occupied with the eradication of the widespread phenomenon, the sheer existence and activities of such movements must be seen as striking evidence that alternative perceptions and a new approach to dealing with child work are needed.

Finally, MICHAEL BAUDRILLON (Harare) made a general and comprehensive statement on children's work. He pointed to three different perspectives on the problem: the mainstream (Western) view condemning child work as a social expression of poverty; the minority view tolerating child work for pragmatic reasons; finally, his own perspective which considers work a human right and hence self-evidently also a children's right. He argued that work is by no means a question of age but rather depends on social traditions and habits. In accepting this premise, the central issue then would be not so much if children do work or not, or if they are paid or not paid, but rather whether the work is harmful to the children or not.

HANS BERTRAM (Berlin) in his comment supported the panelists' point of view in general and stressed that the most important right for children is their right to material well-being. In presenting some criteria used by the OECD in order to measure the level of children's material well-being (for example

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health conditions, educational well-being, relationship within the family), he proposed to further develop the crucial question, under which circumstances work might have beneficial effects for children.

In the final discussion, introduced by David Lancy, it was agreed to see the workshop as a starting point for further research on child work in general and its manifold dimensions beyond exploitation in particular. More detailed attention deserve such issues as the complex relationship and tension between working and learning, between work and school, between child work in capitalist and in domestic structures, between child work in urban and in rural areas, between child work's conceptualization in universal legal norms and in particular habits and, last but not least, between child work and (exploitative) child labor. Additionally, as some participants pointed out, there is a need for more interdisciplinary exploration, especially as regards history. Finally, one may add that comparative research focusing on other continents than Africa should also be put on the agenda. This would allow for a global and at the same time differentiated understanding of this very important, complex and contested issue.

#### **Conference overview:**

Welcome Address: Andreas Eckert (Berlin)

Introduction: Gerd Spittler (Bayreuth)

Barbara Polak (Bayreuth): Children's Work and the Criterion of Liability. The Case of a Family Peasant Economy in Mali (West Africa)

Iris Köhler (Remseck): Learning and Children's Work in a Pottery Making Environment in Northern Côte d'Ivoire

Discussant: N.N.

David Lancy (Utah): The Limited Role of Teaching in Children's Acquisition of the Tools for Survival

Discussant: Kurt Beck (Bayreuth)

Gerd Spittler: Open Family Economies and Children's Work. The Case of the Kel Ewey Tuareg

Discussant: Kurt Beck (Bayreuth)

Cindy Katz (New York): Work and Play: Eco-

nomic Restructuring and Children's Everyday Learning in Rural Sudan

Maria Hahnekamp (Halle): Red Tea from Sudan: Processing and Purchasing Between the Global and the Local

Discussant: Kurt Beck (Bayreuth)

Erdmute Alber (Bayreuth): Schooling or Working? Familiar Decision Processes about Children's Future in Northern Benin – a Case Study

Jeannett Martin (Bayreuth): Child Fosterage, Children's Work and the Spread of Schooling in Northern Benin

Discussant: Julia Seibert (Berlin / Trier)

Beverly Grier (North Carolina): From Kisumu to Mombasa: The Recruitment of Child Labor in Colonial Kenya during the 1920s and Early 1930s

Martin Verlet (Paris / Legon, Accra): Domestic Regulation and Child Labor

Discussant: Andreas Eckert

Manfred Liebel (Berlin): Children's Work and Agency: the African Movement of Working Children and Youth (AMWCY)

Michael Bourdillon (Harare): Debates on Children's Work

Discussant: Hans Bertram (Berlin)

Final Discussion Chair: David Lancy (Utah)

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