RE-NEGOTIATING AN ETHICS OF CARE IN KENYAN CHILDHOODS¹

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Abstract: Childhoods in contemporary Kenya are entangled with discourses of care in a post-colonial landscape. Such imaginaries of childhoods through discourses of ‘care’ and ‘charity’ are well established through Western lenses. Another lens that is often enacted is the lens of de-commercialised, un-spoilt, pure and innocent childhoods in the Kenyan landscape. In this study, the authors utilize Nel Nodding’s concept of an ethics of care, and a feminist lens, to explore this binary of Western views through real experiences of childhoods. This paper provides an analysis of childhoods as lived experiences in Kenya, and challenges constructions of children/childhoods as vulnerable, based upon observations and interviews conducted in Kenya in the remote area of Kwale County.

Key words: Kenyan childhoods; constructions of childhood; ethics of care; children’s agency; resilience.

Hadithi, hadithi? Hadithi njoo!

Uwongo njoo!

Ukweli njoo!

Tamu kolea kolea!

Story, story? Story come!

Lies come!

Truth come!

Let sweetness spread and satisfy!

Introduction

This paper tells stories of commitment, love, belief and hope in Kwale childhoods. Emanating from the narratives of children in Kwale County, Kenya, it moves beyond

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dominant Western lenses of African childhoods through discourses of ‘care’ and ‘charity’, and the converse lens of de-commercialised, un-spoilt, pure and innocent childhoods in the Kenyan landscape. In this study, local researchers spent time with and interviewed children in communities in Kwale County, and the research team utilized Nel Nodding’s notion of an ethics of care and a feminist lens to venture beyond the dominant binary discourses through the children’s narratives. While this paper is an analysis of children’s lived experiences that challenges Western constructions of Kenyan childhoods as vulnerable, it first and foremost elevates the complexity, hopefulness and agency in these children’s lives and stories. *Hadithi njoo*, story come! As in the opening song, we retell the stories that emerged in our times with children and their places and lives as children in the childhoods of Kwale County.

Kwale county as a context of childhoods

Kwale County is one of the six counties in coastal southern Kenya. It is 8,322 square kilometres, of which 62 square kilometres are covered by a water mass. The County is divided into four sub counties; Matuga and Msambweni sub counties are in the coastal plains, while Kinango and parts of Lunga Lunga are located in the semi-arid and Nyika plateau regions. The dominant ethnic groups in Kwale region include Digos and Durumas, which nine Mijikenda families belong to. Other ethnic groups in the region include Kamba, Kikuyu, and Taita. Kwale County is considered to be one of the marginalized regions of Kenya, for example in relation to the amount of development aid received in comparison to other parts of the country. In the international discourse children and childhoods in Kenya are often viewed primarily in the context of development aid and the higher risks associated with childhood vulnerability. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), African children are most at risk, and the Kenyan government has reported that, of the 18 million children in Kenya, around 8.6 million are vulnerable children (Radcliff, Racine, Brunner Huber, & Whitaker, 2012). Another recent report states that about half of the Kenyan population lives below the poverty line (Juma, Alaii, Bartholomew, Askew, & Van den Born, 2013).

The conditions in Kwale County, where the research was conducted, are particular to this area of Kenya. Malaria, schistosomiasis (bilharzia), filariasis, HIV and tuberculosis are all endemic in the area, and Kwale is reported to be one of the poorest and most unequal counties in Kenya. Kwale County has a relatively large proportion of children, with children aged 0-14 representing 48% of the total population (Njonjo, 2013), while 50% of the population of Kenya is below the age of 25 (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2010). Moreover, the county also has a relatively high child mortality rate, exceeding the national average (Matsuyama, Karama, Tanaka, & Kaneko, 2013). The majority religion in the area is Islam, with Christianity and witchcraft also strongly influencing local beliefs, ways of living and constructing of local childhoods. Swahili and other local languages are the dominant and most prevalent language, while some people, usually those who attended school, speak English, which is the second official language in Kenya. Up to 39% of Kwale County inhabitants have no formal education, only 51% have completed primary school, and only around 10% have completed secondary school or higher education (Njonjo, 2013).

Development aid organisations often refer to child vulnerability in their commentaries on such statistics. This image of the child need not necessarily result from the powerful

discourse of development aid that stresses poverty and lack, but can arise from local Kenyan and Kwale cultural portrayals of children. In traditional local myths, for instance, children under the age of three are thought to be endangered by various magical forces and phenomena, such as the evil eye, an evil spirit, black magic, or 'coldness' (Matsuyama, Karama, Tanaka, & Kaneko, 2013). Children's diseases or vulnerable childhoods are seen through the local mythology to arise from these magic forces, so this has a direct effect on how mothers, and the local community, care for children. For instance, the mother responds to the 'magic' of a dangerous force of 'coldness' that enters the child through the fontanelles and toes, by carefully dressing the child in a woollen hat and socks, despite the unsuitable climatic conditions in Kwale. In the local culture, these 'magic' forces also affect breastfeeding practices and early childhood care.

To understand the local mythology, it is important to engage with the local discourses on mothering and care that underlie, for example, the perceived reasons for local children sometimes rejecting maternal milk or having digestion problems. Both of these issues can be explained through the local mythology and magic forces, rather than as resulting from poverty or inadequate living conditions. Local mythology contributes to the discursive understandings of deficiencies in children in ways that differ from the post-colonial development discourse on these deficiencies. The mythological explanations are not based on the assumptions that typically shape the development discourse, where the

objects are shaped by the formation of a particular view based on a fundamental logocentric binary opposition of developed/undeveloped and is further reproduced in the formation of an increasing number of 'abnormalities', such as illiteracy, undernourishment, landlessness or being a smallholder. All these categories are arranged in such a way that the object is assigned a lack in contrast to the basic norm (Profant, 2013, p. 298).

Within the traditional model of care and education of children in Kwale, the birth of a child is celebrated as a sign of fertility and it marks the rooting of a woman in marriage in the husband's community. It is also seen as a 'rebirth' of the elderly and ancestors of the husband's community. Children are regarded as a source of wealth and security for community members in their old age. Witchcraft is one of the prominent cultural beliefs among most communities in Kwale County, and most children are, according to the local people, protected by charms tied around the waist or arms as they play.

Neo-colonial western aid discourses in Kwale

The development discourse perpetuates the colonial dichotomy of the powerful and powerless and thus also the generalized, stereotypical image of deficiency and lack. It legitimizes the 'aid mentality' by emphasizing geographic, political, economic and health deficiencies and need, and depends, therefore, on a constant portrayal of discourses of poverty, malnutrition, and political instability. This dominant discourse is accepted through 'development cooperation' and other forms of 'help', legitimized through images of childhoods that are lacking. For example, Kenya is one of Slovakia's 10 official priority countries for development interventions (Slovak Aid, 2013). Fecenková (2013), in an analysis of *Afriktivita*, a photo exhibition portraying Slovak development projects in Kenya to the

public, argues that the exhibition reproduces stereotypes through photographs of poverty, sickness, disability and deficiency. Most often the images in the exhibition portray children with no shoes, dirty clothes, and water bottles with holes in them. They evoke an emotional response and a perception of acute need of assistance. This image of the child represents a very particular image of Kenya, and by inference, a picture of the South as a whole: “the very south is a child, a subject which passively receives aid” (Fecenková, 2013).

In contemporary times, early childhood education is a particularly strong focus of Western aid intervention. Early childhood development and education (ECDE) is managed through a unifying national ECDE curriculum, developed by the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD). As a way of increasing ECDE access to Muslim children in Kwale County, a KICD Islamic Integrated Education Programme (IIEP) was developed, by integrating Muslim religious education taught at the madrassa, the local Islamic religious school, alongside secular ECDE curriculum activities. The existence of public, private and religious ECDE programmes has enhanced children’s access to education, but has also proven to be insufficient to guarantee universal education (International Labour Organisation, 2010). The ECDE national curriculum covers three levels of early childhood education: (Republic of Kenya, 2013a) pre-primary level one also referred to as baby care

Table 1: Status of ECDE in Kenya versus Kwale County in June 2014 (Education for all 2015(2014)).

NO. OF CENTRES				
KENYA			KWALE	
PUBLIC	PRIVATE		PUBLIC	PRIVATE
25,176	16,163		753	198
ENROLMENT IN ECD				
PUBLIC	PRIVATE		PUBLIC	PRIVATE
1,394,471	786,622		52,802	12,760
NO. OF TEACHERS				
PUBLIC	PRIVATE		PUBLIC	PRIVATE
43,649	35,675		1,547	213
PUPIL TEACHER RATIO				
PUBLIC	PRIVATE		PUBLIC	PRIVATE
31:1	22:1		30:1	25:1
NET ENROLMENT RATE				
KENYA			KWALE	
51.3%			54.2%	
KWALE ECDE TEACHERS QUALIFICATIONS				
DEGREE	DIPLOMA		CERTIFICATE	UNTRAINED
6	209		857	697

for 2-3 year olds; (Republic of Kenya, 2013b) pre-primary level two for 4 year olds; and (Republic of Kenya, 2013c) pre-primary level three for 5 year old children. The education for children in pre-primary levels two and three is provided by the County government, and level one is provided by parents. The multi-faceted nature of ECDE results in interagency collaborative partnerships as well as multiple complexities concerning the cost of ECDE, teacher employment, construction of buildings, and the provision of meaningful teaching and learning materials. Table 1 further locates the prevalence of ECDE attendance for very young children in Kwale within the national Kenyan ECDE landscape.

Methodological considerations

Within this landscape, this study explores childhoods through a lens that looks at the recognition and elevation of traditional knowledge of childhoods and education in the Kwale context. It then analyses the children's agentic involvement in their communities using Noddings' (2013) ethics and conceptions of care. The data underpinning this study were collected in Kwale County, where Slovak Aid cooperation has provided care for mothers and young children, such as preventing and protecting children from undernourishment, and since 2013 has concentrated on children's education as well. The authors of this study have visited Kwale County three times, most recently in April 2015, gaining knowledge of the local environment, and of the people and conditions amongst which the local children live, play and grow up. The researchers closely collaborated with local researchers, members of the community. The site of the research is in Matuga, Kwale, where early childhood teachers from Kwale County train and study for teaching diplomas. The research design included the researchers working closely alongside seven final year student teachers, who collected the data using semi-structured interviews with the children in May 2015. The children were selected through a process of convenience sampling, based on their availability and willingness to participate in the study. Most of them live in villages and settlements in various parts of Kwale County. Interviews were carried out with nine children aged between six and ten years old, four girls and five boys, who attend the local school. The children and their parents agreed for them to participate in the study.

The questions in the semi-structured interviews focused on the contemporary conditions of the children's lives and were conducted in mostly two, and sometimes three, encounters between the researchers and the children. The children were not treated as research subjects, but as an integral part of the research design, and it was the researchers' privilege and pleasure to listen to their stories and learn about, and from, their knowledges. The first encounter helped the children and researchers get to know each other and to gain each other's trust, and for the researchers to learn about the children's family and place and space of living. The second interview focused on the life of each child, his or her everyday routines, hobbies and games, favourite songs, stories, living and dietary habits, that is, the mundane, everyday landscape of the child's life. The interviews were unique and each was developed in relation to the connection between researcher and child, as is common in critical methodologies of researching with children (Steinberg & Canella, 2012). The interviews were carried out in the child's first language. This methodological approach encouraged the children to express their ideas, perceptions, experiences and values without guidance from

the researchers, and facilitated ethical engagements with the children's worlds, where the children were the drivers of the study, rather than the researchers entering the situation with a pre-determined set of questions and expected outcomes. The analysis of this data followed both a critical activist intention and a grounded theory approach, driven by, and acting on, the local social patterns and localised settings (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Hunter, Emerald, & Martin, 2013). The names of the children have been changed to protect their identity. Key themes arising in the interviews tell the children's stories.

Complexities of Kwale childhoods

The impact of the global economy and Western aid discourses on Kwale families, through family members migrating for work, for example, might be seen as shifting realities of family cohesion. Children are generally raised by their grandparents, while their parents work away in the cities and send money home; as the children mentioned, money is sent "for school", and for "food." It is very common in Kenya for parents to migrate from rural areas to work in the towns and cities, demonstrating the importance of the children's stories conceptualising a Kenyan, Kwale construct of family life, children's realities and childhoods. The idea of women taking responsibility for the work at home while men are away is also seen in the narratives. Families in semi-arid parts of Kwale County are particularly likely to experience high levels of poverty in terms of a lack of food and water and unmet basic needs, highlighting the challenges and marginalization in some of Kenya's coastal communities (Gearhart & Giles, 2013). Although life is not easy for the children in this study, their narratives focused on the fun of playing with friends and cousins, and making the best of local materials and activities.

Families and spirituality

The children's families in Kwale vary in size and composition; however, what comes to the fore in the children's narratives is the concept of extended families. Large families, such as those of Abdalla and Joseph who have seven siblings each, and Karisa, with a family of seven, exist alongside others where there may only be one sibling, but also have cousins living with them. Charo's family is a typical Kenyan extended family with "... uncle, his wife, siblings..." all living together. The children reported that the whole family, rather than just the parents, are responsible for supporting the child. Adults in families provide for the needs of the children, and in some cases the whole community, or the whole village. Kwale is semi-arid in some areas, but the soils are rich enough and there is sufficient rain to support crops, as revealed in the children's stories of family farms and growing food supplies. The general lack of schooling experiences among Kwale's people is reflected in the children's stories, of their siblings seldom completing secondary education, and some completing primary school. The children's stories revealed their understanding of the logic of rural-urban migration, as their parents and family members commonly leave the Kwale area for other towns to find work. Most of these families thus become single-head households, predominantly led by grandmothers.

The families live on subsistence farming, as Lucy, who lives with her grandmother, told us "we grow maize, beans, coconuts, peas, cassava, sweet potatoes ...". The children's

mothers and grandmothers have jobs such as selling clothes and shoes; or are peasant farmers, farm labourers; or take care of the family goats and chickens; or run a kiosk; while the fathers' jobs ranged from being a policeman to working in an office or being a cook in a hotel. Abdalla said that his father was jobless but leader of a borehole, showing the importance of having a 'job'. Peter explains that "Daddy works in an office there for color red", describing the logo of the company. The chores children talked about doing around the house included fetching water from a well or river, farming, helping with family tasks at kiosks, looking after chickens, goats, and collecting coconuts and mangoes. Gendered divisions of work feature, for example, in the fact that girls mostly fetch the water and firewood, rather than the boys. Children's chores reveal their daily struggle and the importance given to supporting family by helping with the small informal sector businesses, such as when Charo has insufficient money for school fees, he helps out by "guarding grandmother's donuts at the shed so that they are not stolen". Emerging from the children's narratives is a strong sense of family values, respect for elders, love for others and God, faithfulness and peaceable co-existence. This is captured in their songs, stories, and in their narratives and riddles. The idea of children taking care of their families is deeply rooted as a core personal and collective value.

The children in this study are either Christian or Muslim. The Christian children told us that they go to church on Sundays and sing songs, dance, pray and give offerings. In the indigenous knowledge church attendance is considered to be a time to engage in celebration and dance, as is reflected in the fact that many of the children's favourite songs are church songs. The Muslim children spoke about going to the mosque and also attending madrassa integrated Islamic schools. The madrassas are a community-based initiative which facilitates the development of a quality, affordable, culturally appropriate, and sustainable education for low-income communities. The goal is to provide an Islamic-integrated curriculum of active learning, in which the underlying philosophy values constructivism and the discovery of knowledge within a cultural context, and views each child as an active agent of their own learning (Mwaura, Sylva, & Malmberg, 2008). Christian and Muslim children alike alluded to the idea of tithing—giving a percentage of their family income as money or food—as part of the religious tradition they observed. This highlights the centrality of religion in their lives and the offerings are made in return for the blessing conveyed on the families by the almighty creator. The children's perceptions of respect and disrespect were explicitly mentioned in relation to love, faithfulness, and, as Abdalla says, in being discouraged from fighting and cheating, and living in peace with each other. Alongside the families' religious affiliations, witchcraft is present in the children's stories of traditional knowledge and in their daily experiences. It is considered a manifestation of people's lived experiences and the general human condition (Bond & Ciekawy, 2002).

Food and dietary trends

The foods that featured in the children's daily lives included porridge, "ugali – cornmeal," and "chapatti – flat bread,". Most ate rice, beans, donuts, cashew nuts, peanuts, kale, and other vegetables. Charo was the only child to include biscuits, sweets, and chewing gum, as his favourite foods, "... mmm ... until my stomach is full". The children's diets reflect what

is locally and regionally available, with a majority not reporting eating meat, eggs, or fish. Only Joseph reported eating a protein-rich diet. Their dietary trends highlight nutritional concerns in this region – food shortages, malnutrition, and a protein deficiency, which can result in developmental delays in children, and even death. A malnourishment condition referred to as “kwashiakor” and manifested by a distended stomach (Trawick-Smith, 2013) is common in these areas. The level of food shortages is evident in recent official estimates that 2.8 million or one third of Kenyan children under the age of 5 have stunted growth. Abdalla alludes to the issue of food shortages brought about by poverty by stating that sometimes they have porridge for supper, but do not have anything to eat for breakfast. The government has instituted a school-feeding programme that ensures that children in primary schools get a nutritional diet, they receive porridge meals in the schools in Kwale.

Children’s play and education

Children talked about playing with neighbours and friends at home and around their settlements. They also shared stories about playing with friends at school, and some watch TV at their neighbour’s house. Out of the children interviewed, only Joseph stated that his family owned a TV. Owning a TV in Kwale means belonging to a particular class and gives the child status in the children’s community. Charo says that his father will one day buy them a TV. The games children indicated that they play were soccer, riding old tires, driving ‘rope cars’, skipping rope, throwing beanbags and others. The children mentioned creative uses of materials available to construct toys for their games, such as making paper soccer balls, and using rope to make cars. Their descriptions and stories about their favourite stories, games, and sports reveal a definite sense of fun in their lives, evident in the way the interviews were punctuated with “aaaah!” “eeeh”, dancing and singing with the interviewers, and laughter. The paper soccer balls, tires and rope cars represent indigenous ways of recycling, where everyday household items that might otherwise be discarded become useful teaching and play materials. Teachers in poor areas lack access to recommended teaching materials so, like the children, they learn to improvise and utilise materials that would be overlooked or discarded in Western contexts.

Schooling levels for the children in Kwale do not necessarily relate to their age. Abdalla, for example, is 10 years old and in class 2, while Peter is six years old and in class 1. The class the child is in varies in relation to the family circumstances, the need for the child to work at home, or simply the family’s ability to purchase uniforms and pay other fees associated with schooling. The children enthusiastically spoke of what they would like to do when they are ‘not children anymore’, including being a doctor, pilot, teacher, driver, and a salesman. An example of their rationales for these aspirations is Charo’s statement that he would like to be a “... salesman for cars, bicycles ... so I can make a lot of money ... be rich more than that old man who owns many vehicles in town!” These children’s statements demonstrate that they do not consider themselves to be ‘helpless’ or waiting for aid, but rather as engaged in their community and everyday lives; they are children who dream and want to seek opportunities. Following Noddings (2013), they take on the roles both of the ‘cared-for’ and the ‘one-caring’, in strongly reciprocal relationships within their families and communities. The children’s aspirations were often modelled on role models in their own community,

like Abdalla, who says “I want to be a teacher just like you”, or on benefiting their community, which for Naomi means “eeeehh ... to be a nurse, ... because people will not die any more in our village”. Education is clearly valued and viewed as a key to success, and many of the children indicated that at home the emphasis was on going to school and doing homework, as Peter says, “at home I do homework, and then I go to play”. However, in some instances, such as Abdalla’s, a different discourse emerged, evident in his mother telling him that he should work on the farm because “that homework will not help you [in life]”.

These children act as agents of change in society, weaving contemporary and indigenous knowledges and understandings into their lives. They appreciate the functional aspects of education and the impact it can have on their lives, and accept the school values, which include respect for teachers and learning social values and language such as “... thanks, please, sorry, welcome ...”, as well as having empathy for those who are poor. For instance, Joseph’s parents are teachers and relatively well off, so he wishes they could adopt some of the poor children. Charo reveals that there is bullying and corporal punishment at school, and his aspiration is to “get a good job, wife and ... become a teacher like you so that I can beat ... the bully until he cries”. These are children who are immersed in their local environment and engaged with the world around them, calling for, and caring about, change.

Story-telling

Singing and storytelling is seen as a way of showing joy, teaching social morals and a way of influencing positive and acceptable behaviour, through the children’s singing “... Sorida, a good child, dance, more...”, while shunning negative behaviour. Songs represent the joys of daily life, such as “... someone on a farm wants a wife, wife wants a child, child wants a nanny, nanny wants a dog...”. Others mark transitions in a day’s activities “... time to go home, food is ready...”, “... gather and get in the house to sleep”, and songs come from church, the madrasa, and from school, such as “Head, shoulders, knees and toes”. Visitors to Kenyan schools are typically welcomed with a song, dance and/or poem, as a cultural tradition. Storytelling similarly emphasises folktales, legends and morals related to life. Mystical stories told by grandparents and other adults abound in many rural areas of Kenya (Popova, 1988). Without negating the reality of the poverty surrounding them, the narratives of these children reveal how sensitive they are to others’ hardship. The children’s narratives carry a strong sense that songs and stories prepare and guide them for the realities of life.

Stories are a fundamental part of “modes of traditional African education” (Omolewa, 2007, p. 597), and of everyday family life, where story-telling (particularly by grandparents) is commonplace and forms the basis of children’s social learning (Smith, 1940). For the children it is a very intense experience and they adopt it as part of their own story-telling repertoire. During the interviews these children frequently told stories, about animals in particular, which they remembered, and which formed a real part of their lives and worlds, enjoying for example, ‘*Hadithi: paka na panya*’ (Story about a cat and a mouse):

Paka alipandaa ... Mgomba. Na sasa yuleyule panya akaja, akaja akabwaga mgomba akaondoka na hizo... hizo ndizi. Sasa, sasa paka akaenda kule kwa panya akamuuliza ni nani alibwaga mgomba wangu?, panya hakujibu halafu, halafu paka akampigaa ... Panya halafu akaenda zake halafu paka na panya hawakuwa marafiki tena. Ikaishia hapo.

This is a story where a cat scaled up a banana tree. The mouse came and knocked down the tree. He took the bananas and off he ran. Then the cat went to visit the mouse and asked him who had knocked down his banana tree. The mouse did not reply, then the cat fought him. Then the mouse went away. From that time till now they are big enemies. It ended there.

The importance of stories in a child's social learning is affirmed in the requirement to incorporate participatory story-telling into early education in Kenya (Mbugua, 2013). One outcome of this is a book entitled *Folktales We Can Live By* (2007) published by the Kenya Institute of Education with the support of Barclays Bank and UNICEF Kenya. It is a collection of 14 old folktales from various regions of Kenya, and interestingly, at least seven of the tales are from Kwale District/County ('The Monster, Hare and Lion', 'The Animal Feast, Hyena and Hare', 'The Poor Old Man', 'The Dumb Boy Who Spoke', and 'The King and the Ogre'). While these stories are produced for Kenyan children, with the support of Western institutions, and in English, the children in this study did not demonstrate any connections with them. Notably, the book and the stories are intended to help children in need or vulnerable children, as conveyed in the foreword by the director of the Kenya Institute of Education and representative of UNICEF Kenya:

Young children, in particular, are vulnerable to abuse and hence at risk of HIV infection and AIDS, due to their innocence and their trusting nature. There is need, therefore, to equip them with the basic life skills that will help them reduce these risks (Nzomo & Laakonen, 2007, p. i).

The actual stories are carefully selected to represent Western views of Kenyan moral values and to encourage children to follow them. These stories shape and mould Kwale childhoods. Most often, the stories incorporate the values of friendship and solidarity, mutual support and respect for others. Stories in this book connect these values explicitly with a list of life skills that each story encourages (such as making the right decisions, problem solving or critical thinking). One of the motivations for publishing this book was to encourage Kenyan children to return to their traditional educational views and practices:

In traditional African societies, story-telling was used to educate young children of various aspects of behaviour to enable them to fit in society and become more productive members of their communities. With time, however, this practice has been lost due to modernization, migration to urban centres and the breakdown of family ties (Nzomo & Laakonen, 2007, p. i).

Kwale indigenous knowledges

The importance of recognizing cultural constructions of knowledges of Kwale childhoods is highlighted by the children's identification with orally transmitted stories, songs and games, rather than through books. While Western conceptualizations of the vulnerability of childhoods may be constructed around the absence of revered aspects of Western culture such as reading books, the children's stories demonstrate that other forms of stories and storytelling dominate their learning, play and creativity as part of their public and private lives. The riddles, stories and sayings identified by the children convey deeply cultural messages. A traditional African proverb presents this perspective, as according to Avoseh (2012), a song or an oral story is tantamount to presenting a whole book to a student,

young or old. In this study, the children's expressed choice of songs and stories engenders indigenous knowledge and a deeply historicized literacy (Mohanty, 2003), not just that which is written or read. An example of such a message is the importance of a name.

The importance of a name confirms the intermingling of different communities living in the Kwale region (Gearhart & Giles, 2013). A child's name tells the story of the child's gender, the ethnic community he or she belongs to, the original geographic region of the country of the child's ancestors, and of the child's religious affiliation. Indigenous knowledges can act as a powerful tool in children's lives and allows them to build on their community knowledge, culture and value systems. Indigenous knowledge such as mythology and witchcraft are highlighted in Charo's narrative about how two boys disobeyed and fell in the well, then were buried in the dust, and died when they tried to tell their secret. Charo also tells of a TV show that he watched about how a man lost a gold ring and went to see a witch doctor. He surmises that the witch doctor later "bewitched" the people of the village. This narration shows that the children live in a world where historicized knowledges are disseminated through oral family stories, and technological media such as the television at the same time.

Children's ethics of care

In the dominant tribes in Kwale County, Digo and Duruma, sub-tribes of the Mijikenda, children were and still are regarded not only as a source of wealth, but as security for the community members in old age. As indicated above, this involves children on both sides of the care relationship knowingly being both cared-for and carer. Furthermore, the children are keenly aware of the commitments, contributions and efforts made by those caring for them, and this awareness appears to be what drives their own caring and commitment (Noddings, 2013). Abdalla demonstrates his understanding of this view in his aspiration to become an ambulance driver, "so when my mother gets a cold I will get her to hospital". Care is a dominant concept throughout the villages. This is further visible in children with absentee fathers or mothers, who are raised by, and also raise, extended family members, rather than being seen as 'orphans'. The children in this study who have one or both parents living in other towns/cities understand both the role of their grandparents in nurturing the family and their parents' roles in providing for them from a distance. The children demonstrate the impact of their receptivity of being cared for, for example, in their ability to 'lose themselves' (Noddings, 2013) in their roles and in those that they in turn care for. From these children's stories about their childhoods in Kwale it seems that it not only takes a village to raise a child, but that the child is intimately involved in 'raising the village' as well.

Most recently this landscape of care has been changing. A number of ECDE programmes have been implemented, increasing very young children's access to formal education. Early childhood development and education provision is managed through a unifying national curriculum developed by the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD) that advocates children should attend ECDE from the age of three to five years. However, due to the fees charged by many centre management committees (ranging from Kshs. 100 to Kshs. 500 depending on the needs of the centre, its sponsor, that is, either a religious institution, parent sponsor, or private owner), free primary school education, high illiteracy

levels among parents, and poverty levels in the region, many children do not attend early childhood education. Fees are used to develop the centres, for example, for the construction of classrooms and toilets and the provision of teaching/learning materials, and the County government is in the process of developing regulatory policies on ECDE fees. It is also working towards enforcing a law that states that parents are not required to pay tuition fees for their children to attend pre-primary (however, the expectation that resources will be provided to develop the centres will remain a barrier). Many early childhood centres that follow the Islamic Integrated Education Programme (IIEP), developed to integrate Muslim religious education into secular ECDE curriculum activities, were established at the sites of their places of worship and have led to an increase in Muslim dominated preschools. Most of the private/religious owned preschools in Kwale are founded on the Christian faith.

Our analysis of these children's stories and of the knowledges they convey is grounded in attempts to elevate their social and cultural construction and importance within the local context of Kwale. While embedded in complicated ways in global educational and care discourses, we elevate here the relational nature of their daily realities. Bruner (1998), amongst others, recognized that citizens not only live in their reality, but also create it, and that local realities depend on the ways in which childhoods are supported in their creation of realities, now and in the future. Noddings (2013) suggests that an ethics of care is both a moral orientation and an intended outcome of a relationship; it is both intuitive and receptive. This caring relationship is reciprocal, and as such depends on the cared-for, in this case the children in Kwale, engaging in acts and attitudes of caring. Caring is more than an act, according to Noddings, it is a relation, and indeed an "engrossment" (p. 38) with somebody or something. Caring, then, is not something a person can be, but rather something a person engages with, something a subject does. Every interaction between subjects provides us with an opportunity to enter into a caring relation, through responsibility and responsiveness, rather than through rules and rights. This kind of 'relational self', according to Noddings, arises in subjective relationships with other subjects. This study argued that children in Kwale perform their own, active 'relational self' and that they are engrossed as both cared-for and one-caring, in the very fabric of their families and communities. The children in Kwale have, and clearly perform, agency and capabilities, and conflicts of care that are deeply embedded in their social, geographical and cultural context.

The notions of strength and belief in the possibility that they can weave these two lenses to make a difference to others' lives and to the life of the village by what they do with their own lives are strong for the children in this study. They illustrate what Mitchell, Bateman, and Ouko (2015) describe as important attributes amongst culturally diverse young children, "the 'give and take' of communication and learning" (p. 53), at all levels of their lives, and in particular through what we might see as a renegotiated ethics of care. Not immune to economic and development aid influences, these children 'give' as Noddings' (2013) one-caring, through practical daily commitments to their families, in their chores, fetching, watching and learning. Children 'take', as the cared-for, by learning, observing, absorbing and living, in their multi-layered realities, border-zones epitomised by traditional witchcraft and religious beliefs. The children's relational caring self emerges in complicated ways on the basis of relationships with family members, which clearly rank highly for the children, where their care is a naturally occurring impulse and response to their surroundings (Mitchell

et al., 2015; Noddings, 2013). Far from being simply an emotional response to those that they ‘feel’ are in need, these children also demonstrate a sophisticated political ethics of care, representing Tronto’s (as cited in Dahlberg & Moss, 2005) view that care is “a political idea” and that if we understand it as such, we can “change its status and the status of those who do caring work in our culture” (p. 123). These children’s sense of agency energises their thinking and consideration of the contexts and circumstances of what is required to achieve their goals. Their interwoven knowledge mobilises their educational expectations and aspirations between traditional and contemporary Western-influenced perspectives, to advance their caring to a greater social good, which, to return to the children’s stories, for Joseph means for everyone to have a “good ventilated house watching some educational movies, decent and adequate clothing”. It is the children themselves who renegotiate and do the caring work in their culture.

Concluding comments

Rather than attempting to expose and portray their poverty, this paper validates Kwale childhoods as active and fully engaged, with games and stories of hopes and dreams. In this study, the children’s resilience and determination performed in their everyday pursuits drive their dreams as agents of change in their lives, through their own negotiated models and reciprocated ethics of care. These narratives serve to demonstrate the discrepancies in the literature, for example, in the targeting of such children by global aid and development campaigns (Mahon, 2010). We suggest that children can be seen as far from being helpless, poor and vulnerable, and in need of aid, as represented in the global humanitarian ideologies of African childhoods, by looking at different, local constructions of childhoods. The narratives in this study in many ways provide evidence of the strong sense of agency and resilience in these children, similar to James, Jenks and Prout’s (1998) assertion that children are not only passive individuals but also active social agents. Noddings’ critical feminist lens has been used in this study to reinforce the fact that children and childhoods are not universally poor and helpless. Rather they convey a strong sense of the complexity and intricacy of their multiple subject positions, revealing their opportunities to function as agentic beings within the entanglements of their local—and more distantly global—scenes. This research with the children has elevated children’s voices and rights, and narrates the story of Kenyan childhoods through a Kwale lens. In demonstrating the complexity of the notion of care, this study has shown that Kwale childhoods are ungeneralizable, heterogeneous and diverse, and in constant renegotiation, of what it means to care. This research tells local stories about global issues. It deconstructs Western discourses of care through the multiplicity, resilience and creative, reciprocal energy of these Kwale childhoods.

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