

# Childhood at latitude zero: revealing Sao Tome and Principe children's play culture

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*Abstract:* In the scope of the sociology of childhood, the aim is to present one of the diverse socio-cultural worlds of African children, specifically their play culture, with the intention to reveal Sao Tome and Principe childhood's daily life dimensions by considering those in which children are specialised and thrilled to talk about: games, play and toys. With the support of postcolonial studies, the present research points out that Santomean children from this African country, which lies at latitude zero on the equator, are literally living in between two worlds: simultaneously handling the challenge of being a child in their own society (adult-centrism) as well as defying the standardised Western childhood imposed by occidental hegemonic institutions (Eurocentrism). Nevertheless, it seems that African children's actions, resilience, creativity, and intelligence, can be linked to cultures of subversion and resistance, in challenging social inequalities and fighting for social justice—like counter-hegemonic struggles.

*Keywords:* Sociology of childhood, postcolonial studies, Sao Tome and Principe, play culture.

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## Introduction

In childhood studies, especially the sociology of childhood, it is essential to search for, and foreground, the voices of the African children in order to fill a gap in research and theoretical productions about the processes of constructing childhood in peripheral countries (Prout 2010). In this regard, the intention is to move beyond the ‘narrative of “lacks” about African children’ (Twum-Danso Imoh 2016: 455) and instead, explore in this paper, the cultures of children and the ways that they reveal themselves to be creative ‘(re)producers of the culture’ (Corsaro 1990; Pinto & Sarmiento 1997; Delalande 2001; Sarmiento 2003). This paper aims to shed light on ethnographic research carried out for the purpose of capturing children’s games, play and toys, with a focus on Portuguese-speaking children from Sao Tome and Principe who are recognised as social actors ‘in their own right, assuming the analytical autonomy of children’s social action’ (Qvortrup 1991: 192; Qvortrup *et al.* 2009). However, it is important to note that, as Abebe (2019: 1) argues, we should aim to go ‘beyond the recognition that children are social actors’ and instead, reveal not only their socio-cultural and material contexts, but also the ‘relational processes within which their everyday agency unfolds’.

The research presented here seeks to distance itself from the hegemonic academic discourses as well as from the colonial view of history by listening to the voices of children whose lives have not only been made invisible by the Eurocentrism which dominates the social sciences, but also marginalised by the adult-centrism that remains identifiable in childhood studies. Therefore, the proposal is dialoguing with postcolonial authors (e.g. Mudimbe 1994; Spivak 2010; Chakrabarty 2000; Mignolo 2003; Santos & Meneses 2010; Sanches 2005, among others) in order to fulfil one of the main goals of the research study on which this paper is based, that is, ‘giving voice to the marginalised’ African children. In other words, this paper seeks to listen to the frequently ‘double excluded subjects’ in social research (Colonna 2012)—so called because they are both children and African. The very topic of the present research study, with its focus on children’s play cultures, is itself a discriminated subject within the broader academy as it is not taken as a serious subject.

Childhood cultures (Delalande 2001; Corsaro 2002; Sarmiento 2004) are characterised by the fundamental feature of playfulness (Sarmiento 2004), constituting children’s play as a set of distinct cultural practices, carried out by social actors, belonging to a specific generational group (James *et al.* 1998). Here, these playful cultural practices will be analysed in the interactive and living context of children’s reality, where they produce a specific culture which is, in turn, (re)produced within a broader culture (Brougère 1998). That is to say, that children’s playful cultural practices occur amidst local and global sets of rules as well as legal and symbolic

dispositions that regulate children's position and actions in the society and inform their relations with others.

Even when the realities of African children are highlighted by international media, policymakers or researchers, the narratives these actors have hitherto tended to foreground have 'eclipsed the mundanities of everyday life for many children whose lives are not characterised by "lacks" and difficulties' (Twum-Danso 2016: 456). In contrast, in this paper it is assumed that the alterity of being an African child can be revealed through a subject in which children are specialists, most notably, their engagement in everyday play, games, toys and the varied ways they do this by focusing on their expected postures and gestures, their choices and ways of interaction, their humour, telling of stories (or secrets), as their silences.

After presenting the visual ethnography approach adopted as part of a qualitative approach for the collection of data, the article will illuminate the games, play and toys of the children from Sao Tome and Principe as well as the critical appreciation of the spaces and times they choose to play and the people with whom they elect to play. By acknowledging children's own conceptions, some dimensions of childhood cultures will be revealed. This will specifically be achieved through listening and reflecting on this group of children's daily playful practices and knowledge. Therefore, the aim is not so much to enumerate, measure or weigh the so-called 'disadvantaged' African children (Punch 2003), but instead, to develop an insight into their 'agency' and explore its 'contradictory aspects and effects in their lives' (Abebe 2019: 8; Liebel 2020). In other words, this paper will seek to develop a deeper insight into the lives of these children as well as those of their families and friends: what do they do in their societies? What are their dreams and fantasies? And how these dreams and fantasies help to establish their imaginary worlds.

Pointing to the research study's conclusions, it will be highlighted here that children from Sao Tome and Principe's latitude zero are literally living in between two worlds in addition to being on the line of equator—that is, at latitude zero: simultaneously handling the challenge of being a child in their own society (adult-centrism) as well as defying the standardised Western childhood imposed by occidental hegemonic institutions (Eurocentrism).

## Theoretical framework

### Child studies and post-colonial studies

Within the field of childhood studies, there is a growing community of scholars who are *underlining* the importance of deepening knowledge about childhoods within the context of occidental societies or the Global South. Confronting itself with the concept

of ‘normativity’, the sociology of childhood, for instance, opens up to the construction of new and diverse perspectives about childhood (Nieuwenhuys 2009; Qvortrup *et al.* 2009; Punch & Tisdall 2012; Spyrou *et al.* 2018). Normativity is here understood as the set of rules, legal and symbolic dispositions, that regulate children’s position and actions in society, guiding their relationship with adults, peers, and institutions.

The hegemonic claim of childhood normativity was established in Western modernity (Sarmiento *et al.* 2018: 135–6), based specifically on the ‘feelings of childhood’ documented by Philippe Ariès (1988). Coming from Western European contexts, the ‘hegemonic ideal’ (Crewe 2010; Nieuwenhuys 2013; Balagopalan 2002, 2014) or the idea of a normal childhood could be described as the life of that child who: is aware and enjoys their rights of provision, protection, and participation; was born into a family with a mother and father; is under medical supervision from birth which leads to a monitoring of their growth and development from the first day of life; has access to a range of institutions and professionals responsible for their education, extracurricular and sport activities. Often occurring in gyms, parks or other fun spaces, normalised children’s playful activities are also monitored by adults, previously dividing children in homogeneous age groups, where they can watch children’s programmes, play online or with the PlayStation Portable, often referring to superhero brands, within the so called ‘global material culture’ (Aitken 2001; Buckingham 2011; Wyness 2015).

Working on the assumption that it’s crucial to search for children’s voices in diverse parts of the world to ensure that pluralised knowledge about childhood and children’s lives exist, the point of departure here is to foreground the voices of those who historically have not had a voice in its generational and geographical alterity: African children. Put another way, this paper will reaffirm a central tenet at the heart of discourses within the sociology of childhood—most notably its defence of the view that children are social actors as well as its defence of foregrounding hitherto excluded voices. On this latter point the sociology of childhood adopts a similar standpoint as post-colonial studies.

Postcolonialism is here understood as the set of theoretical and analytical currents which illuminate theoretical and political primacy in analysing the unequal relations between the Global South and Global North. It also considers that both the Western and the non-Western worlds were victims of colonialism, but ‘from the edges or peripheries, structures of power and knowledge are more visible’. Thus, to reveal the underlying structure of power and knowledge, it is best to do so with those who have been marginalised by ensuring that they are given a voice to clearly express the consequences of the inequalities that exist between the ‘north and south of the world’ (Santos 2004: 8). Postcolonial theories challenge the question of the Eurocentric vision of the world, as a markedly colonialist assumption, allowing space for the voices and visions of the ‘subalterns’—that is, those who, during the European colonial domination, were systematically represented as not having agency or voice (Mignolo 2003; Sanches 2005; Santos & Meneses 2010; Nieuwenhuys 2013).

Postcolonial perspectives also help to reflect upon the notion of how childhood normativity is rendering some children invisible, or pushing some childhoods to ‘the margins’, because they do not fit into a normative view of childhood. For instance, without considering the economic, social, and cultural context in which children live, they can be often ‘considered as being in transition (“becoming”) and not as autonomous and complete social beings (“being”)’ (Sarmiento 2013: 32). As Olga Nieuwenhuys (2013: 5–6) puts it:

Postcolonialism’s invitation to look at the other side of the picture or even turn the world upside down, cannot be followed up without challenging current disciplinary boundaries that privilege normative representations of Northern, white, bourgeois childhood (in the singular) and produces by the same token ‘other’ childhoods (in the plural)—both in the North and the South...

Analysing childhood ‘from the margins’ (Mudimbe 1994; Spivak 2010; Chakrabarty 2000; Mignolo 2003; Santos & Meneses 2010; Sanches 2005) constitutes both an epistemological and a theoretical challenge. This, therefore, implies looking away from normative conceptions of childhood in order to problematise it and producing a new perspective that illuminates what Aries (1988) calls the ‘feeling of childhood’ (Sarmiento, Marchi & Trevisan 2018). In this view, researching children’s daily actions in postcolonial contexts, such as those that exist in most of Africa, helps us to problematise Western concepts and prejudices about childhood (Baraldi & Cockburn 2018). Additionally, it also makes possible our ability to further understand the heterogeneous realities of ‘children at the margins’ (Marchi 2007; Sarmiento & Marchi 2008; Sarmiento, Marchi & Trevisan 2018) and defying current concepts of childhood normativity.

Through the analysis of the playful practices of African children who are located at latitude zero of the equator and listening to children as the ‘experts’ of play (Barra & Sampaio 2020), it was possible to document and question the normalisation of children’s play.

## Methodology

### Qualitative methodology: visual ethnography approach

The study was conducted between June 2011 and June 2012 in all districts of São Tomé and Príncipe—in several places within the twelve communities on the island of Sao Tome (urban, peripheral, and rural), and seven communities of the Autonomous Region of Príncipe. The research study adopted a qualitative approach (Lüdke & André 1986; Lessard-Hébert *et al.* 1990), drawing specifically on ethnography as the method for the collection of data.

The research presents the playful practices of more than 1300 children, within 35 agreed observation sessions with children and more than 50 moments of spontaneous

play. In both of these participant observation modalities, an attempt was made to decentralise the role of the adult as the research manager in order to conceive the study as a process which was co-managed with children (Soares 2006). Specifically, the designated agreed observation sessions were carried out in hours and places previously chosen by children themselves once children and caregivers gave their informed consent to take part of the study. Consent was also negotiated with key people and institutions were consulted beforehand in order to enable the researcher to enter the community to participate in, and document, children's playful activities. Frequently, these playful sessions took place in their own communities, at an agreed time, where the researcher met the invited group of children to engage in playful activities. However, it was not surprising that many children from the neighbourhood also came to see what was going on and were welcome to take part in the playful sessions. The designated spontaneous play moments are so called because they were captured by the researcher without any planning for them to occur. That is, those numerous flashed moments in which the researcher could witness children freely playing all around, performing some game, using or manufacturing toys, and so on. However, the inclusion of these spontaneous moments of play in data analysis was equally consented (or not) by the participating children and caregivers.

Through direct, close, and privileged contact with children, the researcher was allowed to reconstruct the processes and relationships (Lüdke & André 1986) that configure the daily experience of children's play. That is to say, carrying out participant observation enabled the understanding of the mechanisms of domination and resistance, oppression, and contestation, at the same time that they are conveyed. In addition, visual data collection and its analysis allowed the re-elaboration of knowledge, attitudes, values, beliefs, ways of seeing and feeling reality and the world by children and by the researcher, decontextualising and (re)contextualise collected data.

The analysis of thousands of photographs, hundreds of pages of field notes, and dozens of videos collected during the field work brought many answers about where, when, with whom and how children play. In both observation modalities the following details were systematically registered: community, date and hour that playful activities took place; the identification of the participating children (boys and girls, minimum and maximum age); the space(s) for holding the playful session, or even some games; the chronology of activities and their duration (both those announced or declared by the child and those actually performed by them); materials, toys or artifacts used in each activity; peer groups involved in each activity; the initiation or announcement of each playful activity; the identification of the supervisor or advisors for each activity; parallel activities happening close to the children's play session and sometimes far away from the main playgroup—or from the 'epicentre of play' (Barra 2016).

The rebuilding of the processes and relations that shape the daily experience of play, games, and the use of toys by children from Sao Tome and Principe was



mirrored and fixed with the support of visual methodologies. That is, by enabling the use of photography and digital video as research tools, carrying out a ‘visual ethnography’ (Pink 2007) contributed to the collection of descriptive data reflecting on children ‘... in specific contexts, with specific experiences and in real life situations’ (Graue & Walsh 2003: 22). This ‘micro-sociological and ethnographic study’ (Hengst & Zeiher 2004) is here characterised by children’s autonomous and competent actions as a key aspect of the sociological investigation on childhood (James & Prout 1990a; 1990b; Segalen 2010). Hence, it is important to reinforce the voice, participation, and ‘agency’ of children (Abebe 2019; Abebe & Ofose-Kusi 2016) in the production of sociological data.

## Context

Sao Tome and Principe is an African archipelago, composed of two volcanic islands located at the gulf of Equatorial Guinea, about 300 km from the West African coast, being crossed by the imaginary line of the equator: latitude zero. Portuguese explorers first encountered the island of São Tomé in 1470 and colonised the country for 500 years, until 1975. Being the second smallest African country, with about 215 000 inhabitants (INE-STP 2021), one-third lives on less than US\$ 1.9 per day, and more than two-thirds are poor, based on a poverty line of US\$ 3.2 per day of the World Bank. Very dependent on foreign aid, Sao Tome and Principe has an economy based on the production of cocoa which is responsible for many exports. Fishing is also a key element of the economy, while in recent years tourism has started to become seen as a strategic sector to be developed.

Sao Tome and Principe’s climate is equatorial, hot, and humid, with two seasons: the warm and rainy season roughly from October to May, and the other dry and mild season from May to August (known as *gravana*). The cultural wealth (language, cuisine, culture, worship, religion, etc.) comes from the miscegenation between Portuguese and indigenous people associated with the coast of Guinea as well as Angola, Cape Verde, and Mozambique. The official language is Portuguese but the Creole languages (as *Forro*, *N’gola* and *Lung’ye*) are also spoken within the two islands.

The population is very young, with children aged zero to fourteen years representing more than 40 per cent of the population (INE-STP 2021), and this may be the reason underpinning the Santomean saying which states ‘*mina ça likêza pòbli*’, that is, ‘children are the wealth of the poor’. Due to the demographic significance of children within the population a number of studies have been produced which provide information that indicate that children are a priority target for attention and protection in the country. In general, it’s conveyed an image of the ‘victim child’ and, above all, the situation of children as ‘a subject and not like subjects’ in their societies (Sarmiento 2003). Then, it’s substantially important to reflect on

how local and global constructions of children can interact and relate to each other and contribute to the deconstruction of the idea of a unique, homogeneous, or normalised childhood.

## Findings

In the next pages, the analysis of the games, play and toys of the children from Sao Tome and Principe illuminate the ‘cultures of childhood’ (Delalande 2001; Corsaro 2002; Sarmiento 2004), especially in the critical appreciation of the space in which they play, the chosen time, peer group formation, as well as about who is playing or watching play. The ‘peer group’ (Corsaro 1990) highlighted here represents the collective of children who are immersed in the same playful culture. That is, a particular generation in a particular historical period, recognising a complex and hierarchical structure of material elements (such as games and playful activities), rites, artefacts (such as toys), ceremonial dispositions, norms, and values (Brougère 1998).

### Children’s games

The frequent use of verbs such as walking, jumping, climbing, descending, climbing, sliding, running, pushing, hanging, whirling, etc. in the field notes, sheds light on the nature of the playful activities that I noted in most of the observation sessions. However, children’s predilection in playing games using all kinds of balls is evident in the data analysis, even when the ball did not exist and, in some cases, was spontaneously handcrafted using different waste materials.

The performance of games is dominant in the activities carried out in the observation sessions, constituting an important category of analysis, both due to its frequency and its diversity in the observation sessions. The popularity of many games in this study is a testimony to how being outdoors in nature is associated with the ability of children to use up a lot of energy, with no adults having to tell them to get off screens or the couch.

It’s also important to point out that some games were never observed by the researcher. Instead, they were addressed by some children as other ways of playing, some of which were prohibited by adults. For example, hide and seek, *beijinho beijoca* (kiss, kiss), or *mamãcupapá* (mothers and fathers) are games which manifest intimacy between boys and girls and hence, were played out of the sight of strangers. This finding makes me wonder why children talked about these forbidden games to me even though they knew that they wouldn’t perform them anyway while I was around. It seems that between children’s wishes and adults’ impositions there is an uneasy



generational understanding: children know they shouldn't play these games, but they still play them; adults know that it is useless to prohibit these games, but they still forbid them.

### Children's play

In the scope of the playful activities, it's important to note the frequency of activities like dancing, singing, acting or make-believe play. The meteorological conditions of this tropical country are the background stage for children's creativity and playful activities either constraining it or enhancing it. Examples include children pretending to 'fish' in large pools of water left by the floods, or flying kites, spinning a fan, or imitating the fluttering *Superman* cape when enjoying the blowing winds in the *gravana* season. Children also showed that most of these make-believe activities can be played only with their own bodies, with a playmate or with a small group of children, rolling or spinning with each other, riding piggyback or *bligá* (simulating fighting), for example. In general, the ways in which children showed that they like, and want to, play seem to be totally opposed to the ways in which play is organised and regulated in Western societies nowadays, according to a 'hegemonic ideal' (Crewe 2010; Nieuwenhuys 2013; Balagopalan 2002, 2014). In particular, the games that seem to cause more pleasure and fun do not need to have elaborate toys (sometimes they need nothing at all) or to be held in special appropriate places. The intensity and enjoyment of children's play seems to lie in the ability to create, despite the challenging circumstances children face within this context.

It is also common to observe Santomean children playing by using natural materials or elements of nature, as in *brincadera di barro* (modelling the clay) or *trepá na madera* (climbing trees), respectively. However, these activities are not done as often as children would want. This is due to the fact that climbing a neighbour's tree without their permission means breaking social rules; and playing with clay can become too expensive for certain households who may not be able to pay for the needed soap to wash children's clothes after play, for example.

### Children's toys

During the observation sessions, the use of toys by children was not significant. However, everything seemed to appear as toys in the hands of children. Thus, it was reported that the chocolate cake made with clay became an icing cake when it was covered with ashes or ornamented with flowers, chopsticks, or dry seeds; children pretended to cook by using *blagá* (crush red seeds) to obtain *piri-piri* (*chilli powder*). Children also explained that they were 'sewing' when I observed that they were sticking

thin sticks green leaves together to make soldiers' hats or bands, shredding banana leaf to make skirts or wigs, or using dry banana leaves to make *boneca da folha di bananera* (banana leaf dolls). Additionally, amongst the toys manufactured by children, often produced by combining natural and waste materials (including all types of caps, boxes, cartons, cans, plastics, packaging, wires, and so on), were also found toys like *finá-finá* (smashed rolling taps), *gualala* (stroller), *mira* (hook), or *ventoinha* (fan made with leaves), for example. In line with the make-believe play described above, it seems that the great joy in playing with toys is not so much in the objects themselves but in the creative production process, with some children even transforming garbage into something to play with (Figure 1).

In the category of commercial toys a few standardised toys were found such as a basketball, a bicycle, a *Barbie* doll, or the *Spiderman* figure. Those commercial toys were rarely seen according to study's general data. Although, in contrast to this scarcity, numerous branded toys were observed in one specific session. These toys were



**Figure 1.** One of the self-made children's toys.

brought to the agreed observation session by an adult (mother) but were not age-appropriate for the participating children, as they were mostly sensorimotor stimulation baby toys. Hence, during this session two siblings (nine and six years old) often demonstrated a willingness to subvert suggestions by adults about how to play these toys by finding different ways to use those toys from their original function; for example, pretending to be on the phone with a remote control or using *Ruca's* piano as a Disc-Jockey mix table. Also, instead of playing with the toys, the siblings asked many times to go cycling or to go and play catch with their friends who lived next door, preferably barefoot like them, instead of watching cable TV, a DVD or singing to the researcher, as their mother had suggested.

### Play spaces

The spaces chosen by children for carrying out agreed observation sessions and those that they actually used to play were frequently open and multifunctional public spaces, such as the community yard, the soccer field, the atriums or community halls, the courtyard of religious or non-governmental organisations, the community ballroom, as well as laundry spaces, street vending spots, or community television spaces, for example. It is important to remember that the preference for children to play in community yards may be anchored in the most traditional way of organising the social space in Sao Tome and Principe. That is, the community yard (Figure 2) represents the space where everything happens and everyone passes by, also the place where 'solidarity or conflict resolution is operated and carried out in a public and consensual way', functioning as a 'metaphor for this tiny country' (Mata 2004: 26). Therefore, children choosing such spaces to play also reveals the way they are reading their social and cultural surroundings at the same time as making changes they desire. In other words, children are doing the (re)production of their own playful culture, within a broader adult culture (Brougère 1998).

Choosing large open spaces to play, such as community yards, squares, or football fields, can also be explained by the fact that they made possible the ability to host a large number of participants and presented ideal conditions for large groups of players. However, among the variety of spaces chosen by children to play there were also included spaces under the children's houses, the balconies and porches attached to their homes or those of their neighbours, whether they were under construction or were abandoned buildings. Although these spaces can be considered as private territories, children often played there while interacting with passers-by who also did not question the presence of the children in that space. That can also be

<sup>1</sup> This is a space in the community where there is a TV for all members to watch. This is seen as a solution within a context whereby not all families have a TV, or even electricity.



**Figure 2.** Performance of games at a Santomean community yard.

highlighted in the case of two older boys playing with their private Playstation on the community television space,<sup>1</sup> that is, they are privately playing in a public space.

Many of the spaces chosen by the children to play are, at first glance, unsuitable for playing according to an (Western) adult eye, however later they are revealed as being fundamental in the very configuration of the children's games, that is, it's often the space itself that dictates and explains the nature of playing. An example is when children collect coconut leaves in a torrential rainstorm just to slide down the mud slopes as part of an adapted skiing competition. Another situation that helped to undermine the appropriateness' conception of playing spaces was the researcher's confrontation with children's make-believe grave as part of a game just in the cemetery's main entrance (Figure 3). Additionally, I observed children jumping all around the cemetery—both inside and outside of its walls (Figure 4). Maybe in this case, by choosing the cemetery to play in, children are just finding their own way to deal with death since in Sao Tome and Principe children are not allowed to participate in the rituals associated with any funeral.

In these examples, it was essential to assume a position of discovering perspectives and meanings attributed by the children themselves to the play experience; that is, by conceiving the space in which children play 'as an unfinished product and, by the social uses that children invest in it, to show them as social actors involved in a dual social integration, both in the adult as in children's world' (Ferreira 2012: 237). Also, the spaces where children are playing are different both for boys and girls, as most of the collected data reveal that girls play closer to their homes or under them, as well as on its stairs, balconies or porches linked to their home. This fact





**Figure 3.** Playing at the cemetery.

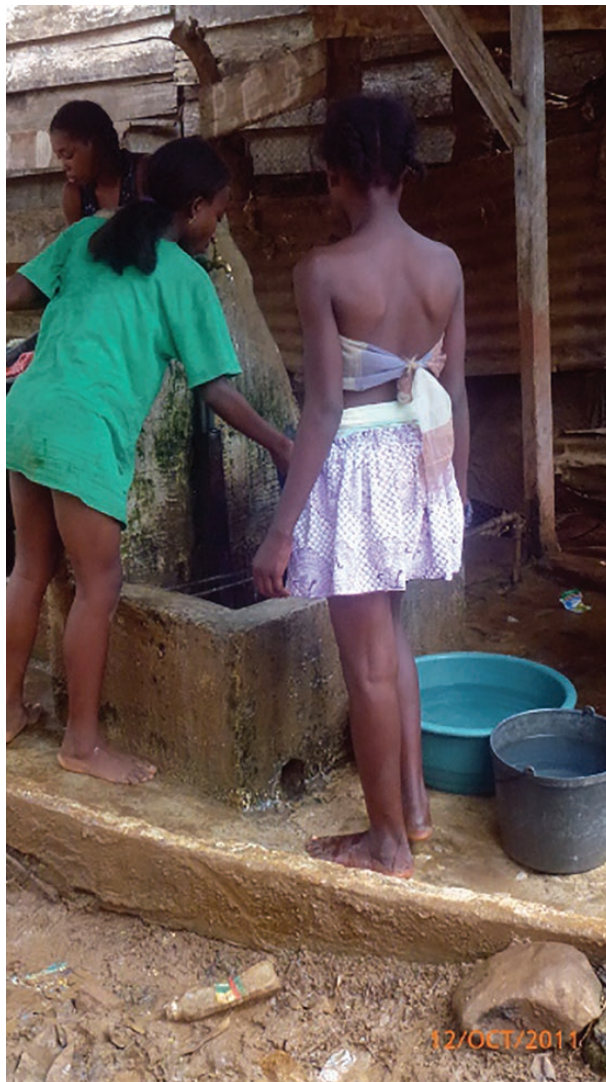
can be directly related to the social roles' perception by each gender, corroborating the findings of other studies carried out in communities in other African countries (e.g. [Guerreiro 1966](#); [Rossie 2005](#); [Koppele 2012](#); [Colonna 2012](#)). Specifically, the fact that girls play nearer home is not only about the fact that that enables them to be supervised by their family members; also, it is because girls are responsible for carrying out many household chores and simultaneously taking care of younger siblings. Boys, on the other hand, are often responsible for carrying out tasks that involve taking more distant routes, such as running errands, buying something at the market, fetching firewood from the bush or collecting water from the river, for example. This makes it possible for this group to play further away from their homes, plan outings and go on walks with their favourite companions and toys (bicycles, footballs or *gualalas* (wheelbarrows)).



**Figure 4.** Playing at the cemetery.

### Play time

The observation sessions were always negotiated with children as well as with their responsible adults, who clearly place children's housework as a priority, allowing them to come and play only after they had completed their chores. Nevertheless, the observation showed that children can also play during the performance of their household chores, that is, they play while washing clothes (Figure 5), bathing in the river (Figure 6) or while selling homemade biscuits, for example. An episode illustrating this was related to the task of fetching water. The mother of one of the girls attending the observed session requested that her daughter should go and fetch water before



**Figure 5.** Playing games while doing housework.





**Figure 6.** Children playing in the river.

starting any game. As a result, this girl called her friends and headed for the communal tap, sadly verifying that the tap was pouring little water at a time. This meant that the process of fetching water was going to take a long time. Understanding the extended time needed to fill the containers, the girls placed the containers in order to fill them one by one while they animatedly performed numerous games of skipping rope (Figure 7). Another example came from boys who would take longer routes to carry out tasks such as running errands for adults, finding herbs for rabbits, or carrying bottles of water for home, for example, in order to play with their friends who they would often ask to accompany them on an errand.

Children often informed the researcher that the most suitable periods to play would be only in school holidays, on Saturdays or Sundays, as long as the catechesis and mass times are safeguarded as well as the traditional Sunday lunch, held on the beach



**Figure 7.** Playing games while doing housework.

with extended family. Hence, as long as these social, religious, and family commitments were respected children would then be available to play. Nevertheless, observing children for one year on the islands showed that children found time to play all year round, at all hours, and on all days. Thus, they played on holidays or school breaks, but also during the school period: before going to school, in the school playground, or at the time of *desmanchada* (the end of school period). They also played during the trip to, or from, school since in most communities these trips were carried out on foot, by groups of numerous boys and girls (Figure 8).

In this way, reflecting on the disparity between children's words and actions it's important to consider that maybe children are saying just what they think adults want to hear (Alderson 1995; Mahon *et al.* 1996), especially when it comes to a Western white adult who wants to know about their games. In short, by choosing and presenting the appropriate time to play, children from Sao Tome and Principe creatively weave their play culture between what is inscribed in children's cultures built locally within the scope of their peers, family, and friends and what is being dictating by actors and hegemonic institutions. In other words, the actions of these African children seem to be situated in the convergence between local (family, friends) and hegemonic (school, church) rules and constraints.

### Who plays?

It was essential to listen to what children told us in their natural play contexts, in different ways, about who was participating, initiating, directing, guiding, or ending play activities. Likewise, an analysis that considered gender and age was essential in realising who plays alone, who plays in the company of a friend or in small groups of children, and how small or large girls' and boys' play groups were. It was also possible to



**Figure 8.** Children's playing while going to school.

account for the hierarchical interaction's rules of children among themselves, as well as the way they respect rules and orders from the adult social worlds in which they operate (Ferreira 2004). In this way I was able to note both intra and intergenerational dynamics in the playful context through the way children interacted with peers and adults in a playful context.

In most of the arranged observation sessions there was a large age range in the composition of the numerous groups of participant children (from months to more than 18 years of age). Most of the observation sessions were held in open spaces within the communities allowing to note that the positioning and action of children during the session were not indifferent to their age and gender. That means, by reviewing visual data it was possible to define the image (both literally and conceptually) of three concentric circles towards an epicentre of play, where most of the participating children perform playful activities. As will be further explained, in most of the carried-out observation sessions, each one of these circles were occupied by different protagonists doing different activities.

The first circle, larger and further away from the epicentre of play, was occupied mostly by adult, men who observed the play (Figure 9). Alongside this group, who more often than not seemed to ignore what was happening, there were often found groups of primarily older boys, but which could also include younger boys aged 11 or 12 years old. Therefore, in the place where the apparently uninterested men were, were also boys



Figure 9. The first concentric circle of the combined observation's sessions.



who frequently appeared during the observation sessions carrying various toys, wheelbarrows, strollers of all kinds or balancing tyres, pulleys, and hoops. Frequently, these boys simply stopped to watch the ongoing play session or went on to play their own games a little further away. In a brief analysis of the games, they were playing away from the main group, these included activities such as: *trepá na madera* (climbing trees); *bligá* (engaging in pretending fights); playing soccer; or riding a bicycle (Figure 10). It seemed that these boys were demonstrating their maturity and virility by keeping away from the ongoing games of younger children and observing them like the adults or distancing themselves away to perform other types of games. There were several episodes in which I found myself as an object of romantic interest of these boys, further indicating the idea that they did not want to be seen as children and sought to highlight their maturity by asking me out. The fact that they are accompanied by toys did not invalidate this argument, because, as already explained above, strollers and wheelbarrow were often used by boys to work and not to play. Carrying a soccer ball, on the other hand, seemed to be a distinctive sign of maturity, because in this case we were dealing with ‘the reminiscence of an institutionally supported culture, related to the seriousness that is attributed to soccer clashes, which is not credited to other performances and to other



**Figure 10.** The first concentric circle of the combined observation’s sessions.

local interactions’ (Nascimento 2013: 193). Also, in the case of climbing up trees in the surrounding space, this activity would only be considered a game if its purpose was not to collect fruits and offer, or sell, them to the same children who were participating in the play sessions—a point which they often emphasised.

In the second circle I found women and older girls who, being closer to the epicentre of play, were helping in the organisation of the play group but not only that (Figures 11, 12). The activities of this second identified circle were carried out by older girls (over 14 years old) and it’s very similar to the real-life multitasking nature of a Santomean adult woman. That is, simultaneously playing, working, and taking care of the youngest children, (Figure 13) offering their lap, providing food, or giving them some attention, for example. Furthermore, these older girls were guiding children in the ongoing games, giving new ideas to older games, behaving like a referee, giving tips and hints for the best performance, or providing materials for carrying out new playful activities, for example. However, these girls were not only attentive to the ongoing



**Figure 11.** The second concentric circle of the combined observation’s sessions.



**Figure 12.** The second concentric circle of the combined observation's sessions.

play of young children in their charge because they often had to withdraw to carry out other activities like selling candies, as can be illustrated by my field notes from one of the agreed observation sessions (Figure 14):

... I captured the moment when one of the older girls—the one with the baby asleep on her back, having abandoned the can game, goes to the vending stand that she has set up to attend



**Figure 13.** One of the multitasking girls in the combined observation's session.





**Figure 14.** One of the multitasking girls in the combined observation's session.

to an incoming customer: one of the older boys who also participates in the session 'becomes' a client. She is selling a sugar and coconut candy that is much appreciated by children.

(CS field notes: R. P. G.—São Tomé Island, 31 August 2011)

Analysing the nature of many activities in which younger children were involved—often in the arms of a girl, *a bombor* (strapped to their back with a fabric) or simply standing by their side, it's clear that they were mimicking what was taking place in the observation session. For example, they used the same space for the repetition of the same game; or played with a wide range of materials abandoned by play groups, such as a banana tree rope, plastic bags, basins, bottles, and ropes. It's also often verified that these young children do not cross the imaginary border that separates them from the epicentre of play. The following field note is enlightening:

Reflecting on this chronology of events is familiar to me, that is: when the play space is vacant or when the utensils or toys are left by the older children, the young children regain it to play; now without the confusion of the older ones, quietly or without spectators. It's visible today that the 'football table' cardboard box is used to play only when no one is using it anymore. ... I observe younger children playing in the places formerly 'spectacle stages' for the older ones and then I capture them immersed, playing in their own way.

(CS field notes: R. P. N. - São Tomé Island, 24 August 2011)

At the very epicentre of play, in turn, there are numerous boys and girls who are effectively participating in the games during the observation session, most of the time with playful activities being decided and guided by older girls. There were find a huge part of the reported games in this study, like jumping, catching, running, searching, stopping, dancing, or sitting games.

Frequently formed and visualised at the agreed observation sessions, the scrutiny of these imaginary concentric circles mainly through visual data retains the idea that men, women, girls, and boys' geographical situation in the play stage at the same time makes a clear demarcation between the traditional social roles attributed to men and women in Sao Tome and Principe.

## Discussion

Through broadening the lenses through which we analyse children's play, games, and toys, as well as their spaces, times and joint protagonists of play, this article has revealed the choices and actual use of spaces to play, the circumvention of rules about play time, as well as the roles played by the youngest and eldest actors in the daily playful life of children from Sao Tome and Principe. Hence, we are now able to recognise the play as another way children use to give meaning, as well as to interact, transform, and defy, their sociocultural and material worlds. Through the voice of the most qualified informants to do so, we realise that children's play culture is indelibly marked by their geographical, economic, and sociocultural contexts.

As explained, the simple positioning and (re)actions of the different actors during playful sessions helped to reveal the distribution of knowledge and power within the group of children, and between them and adults in Sao Tome and Principe's society—respecting or defying a deeper cultural identity, social and power relations, as well as reflecting generational and gender belonging. That is, children's processes of comprehension, experience and reproduction of the culture are clearly marked by child's gender and generation of belonging. In this way, playful activities constitute a 'total social phenomenon' (Huizinga 1980; Callois 1990) as they are actions that incorporate the historical and cultural dimension of human behaviours and are anchored in a multiplicity of elements of a given situation (spatial, temporal, social and relational).

Children's play culture from Sao Tome and Principe, a country located at latitude zero of the equator, helps to interrogate childhood 'normativity' and to reconceptualise African childhoods and children's agency. Specifically, it enables us to reflect on how local concepts of children and childhood contribute to the deconstruction of the idea of a unique, homogeneous or 'normalised' childhood.

As stated at the beginning of the article, my intent was to reveal how children located at latitude zero of the equator are not only living between two worlds geographically, but are also living between two worlds culturally and socially which is reflected through an analysis of their playful interactions and activities. In particular, children's activities and interactions showed how they are simultaneously handling the challenge of being a child in their own society (adult-centrism) as well as defying the standardised Western childhood imposed by occidental hegemonic institutions (Eurocentrism) through revealing tensions that existed and ways to overcome them, as well as circumventing social rules and (re)producing their own childhood culture.

In relation to challenging adultcentrism in their own societies, Santomean children are defying adult rules and authority when they engage in games, play, or use toys in very specific ways. Otherwise, how come children told me (a strange European occidental adult) about forbidden games, often right in front of the adult who prohibits them? Also, how come children keep doing really rewarding playful activities despite the fact that adult rules restrict them from climbing trees and economic constraints prevent some from modelling clay? Similarly, how come children from a privileged socio-economic status ignored their material possessions and bypassed their caregiver's suggestions just to play outdoors with their next-door neighbours (preferably barefoot)?

With regards to defying Eurocentrism or the rules of a normalised childhood, in the performed games, play and also in toys children's use, there is a clear confrontation between the experiences of children I talked to and the 'hegemonic ideal' (Crewe 2010; Nieuwenhuys 2013; Balagopalan 2002, 2014) which centres around the need for adequate space, regulated time, organise play, and the supposed necessary acquisition of high quality (branded) toys, regulated by western institutions (school, church or global market). It seems that when children play in Sao Tome and Principe there is no lack of time for them to engage in nature and fresh air, nor a lack of physical exercise. Also, while children play games, they often only need their body to perform interesting make-believe play, and sometimes branded new toys drive away their play mates.

In short, elaborating on the data we can say that Santomean children are showing a deep understanding of the complexity of their social position in an extremely poor country, so in the context of play culture children's interests are focused on negotiating time, sharing spaces, and guarantying the company of their peers, experiencing the 'common culture of childhood' (Buckingham 2011: 162). Data analysis also showed that peer groups' dynamics are fundamental so the playful culture can be transmitted, developed, and reinvented in each generation of children, both diachronically and synchronically (Corsaro 1985; James *et al.* 1998; Delalande 2001; Sarmiento 2004). That happens, for example, when older children teach the rules of a game to the play group while at the same time accepting the newest reinvention or modification to the games they are playing. However, those dynamics also reveal meanings, constrains and possibilities of being

a student, a son or a daughter, a male or female, a child or an adult, moreover, of being an almost child or an almost adult within Sao Tome and Principe's society.

Generally, the reflections that have been exposed here allow us to verify the complexity inherent to the study of children's playful cultures at the same time reaffirming the importance of studying children within their dynamics and interactions, culturally, socially, historically, and economically contextualised.

Given the importance of these African children's playful testimony, it's now our major duty to seriously reflect about the pluralities of meanings in each child's action, modes of experience and resilience, and about the ways they are willing to (re)create reality. Maybe they are communicating, in the best way they know, which are their joy and their struggles in challenging social inequalities and pursuing social justice.

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