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Seen, heard and protected in their best interest: childhood construction within the worldview of the Fantse of Ghana

Alex J. Wilson

Abstract: Children in Africa are generally construed to be marginalised due to their minimal involvement in family decision-making processes. This article, which provides a worldview of childhood construction among the Fantse of Ghana, draws on the PhD dissertation and other research studies by the author and uses the social constructivist theory by Vygotsky and Meyer Fortes' stages in the developmental cycle in domestic groups to explore children's social standing. The expectation in the academy is that many of the worldviews in African societies should be waning. However, they prevail in some rural and urban communities in Ghana today. Significantly, the larger context of Fantse social systems promotes peer-learning and acculturation among children. Therefore, even though some children may be marginalised, the emphasis placed on children's voices ensures their participation in decision-making in matters affecting them. This article recommends that Fantse social systems should be considered for ensuring compliance with child rights policies in Ghana.

Keywords: Childhood, children, community, domestic group, family, Fantse (Fante), Fortes, personhood, Ghana.

Note on author: Alex J. Wilson (PhD) is the immediate past Director and Senior Lecturer of Cultural Anthropology at the Centre for African and International Studies, University of Cape Coast. He obtained his PhD in Interdisciplinary Studies with specialisation in Anthropology and Cultural Studies from Ohio University, USA. His research interests include African social, political, educational, and health systems. He has devoted a considerable part of his career to researching the indigenous family systems of the Fantse (Fante) speaking Akan of Ghana. Among his works are 'Descent, Filiation and the Rights of Children among the Fantse of Ghana', a book chapter in *International Human Rights and Justice* (2016), and 'Sons and Patrifiliation among the Matrilineal Fantse of Ghana', also a book chapter in *West Africa: Economic, Political and Social* (2020).

Introduction

Childhood in Africa is often presented in ways that suggest that children are marginalised. They are represented as lacking the good things that enhance their development and are seen as victims of social injustice and exploitation. As a result, society advocates that, adults should act in the best interests of children (Bordonaro & Payne 2012; Botchway 2019; Ensor 2012; Twum-Danso Imoh 2016; Spyrou *et al.* 2018). Some international organisations frame childhood care and services within Western narratives which problematise African forms of childrearing and preclude African children from enjoying many of the rights spelt out in international human rights documents (Collins 2017). These narratives often contend that within African cultures children are only seen but not heard, and thus, they are not involved in family decision-making (Godwyll 2008: 21–28; Oduro-Sarpong 2003). Such arguments lead to a situation whereby tensions seem to arise between indigenous African cultures and dominant human rights discourses.

This article argues that the idea that 'children are seen but not heard' in African contexts is erroneously conceived within the global conception of childhood as when we look closely at various cultures in Africa, we can see evidence of children being seen, heard, and protected. To illustrate this point, this paper focuses on understanding the concept of personhood and the broader worldview of the Fantse people of Ghana within which there is a recognition that children should have opportunities and privileges within both social and cultural realms to participate in decision-making affecting their interests. It adopts the dimension of childhood which Abebe & Ofosu-Kusi (2016) describe as 'indigenous' and unique but, it does not subscribe to their notion that this approach excludes children from the impact of the forces of modernity and technological development. The justification for the deviation is that their stance reinforces the concept of 'othering' by treating children of Africa as the 'other', ignoring their cultures and excluding concerns about them from the discourse on global childhood (Collins 2017).

Drawing on the conviction that the daily activities of children subsist on culture, this article identifies some values about children's lives within the Fantse social system and the diversities associated with childhood construction that provide the basis for modernity, and for illuminating the mundanities of childhood. The need to uphold aspects of customs in examining a phenomenon also stems from the roles of indigenous values in shaping modernity. For example, no society changes to its modern state without carrying aspects of its traditions to the modern era (Munoz 2007). Furthermore, after statutory laws have been enacted, the indigenous institutions that are not often considered in framing the laws rather become the agents for implementing those laws (Wilson 2016: 149). These call for a better understanding of the roles that indigenous institutions play in addressing issues of child protection and ensuring that children's rights are upheld in Ghana. Accordingly, this article foregrounds indigenous ideas that have, hitherto, been

left out of dominant discourses on childhood and children's rights because they are seen to be at odds with dominant rights discourses when they can provide some support for contemporary human rights discourses (de Castro 2020). It is also grounded in the view that indigenous knowledge is excluded from, and mitigates, the effects of the negative representation of childhoods that have resulted from coloniality. Limiting this article to the indigenous worldview of the Fantse of Ghana, a matrilineal people who practise the double unilineal descent system, is a call to other researchers to examine the extent to which other African cultures may similarly provide structures and ideas that can complement rights discourses. This will enable the adoption of a holistic cultural-based approach in strategies to implement children's rights within these contexts.

Methodology

The worldview produced in this article was developed from my previous studies, including my PhD dissertation and other research studies, the periodic fieldwork experiences that I organise for my third-year Research Methods class at the University of Cape Coast and my personal observations of children as they play and participate in house chores in many of the Fantse communities in which I have lived. The thesis was a phenomenological study on matrilineality and inheritance where aspects of the rights of women and children were studied in five Fantse communities: Dago, Kormantse No. 2, Mankesim, Apewosika and Baafikrom. The follow up was done after I had taken my research methods students to Kormantse No 1 and 2 over a period of five years, where I lived with the students, among host families for a period of two weeks in each instance and gathered data. Many of the reports written by the students confirmed the findings of the thesis. It is pertinent to note that I am a Fantse who has lived aspects of these childhood experiences and have as well been influenced by Western education and urbanisation. However, to avoid personal biases, I also asked more questions as I interacted with members of the communities in order to develop a deeper insight into the indigenous Fantse worldview. The information on the worldview gathered has also been grounded in the literature, especially the theoretical frameworks provided by Meyer Fortes and Lev Vygotsky, and others who have written on children and childhood. It must be emphasised that all these have contributed to the presentation of this discussion focusing on the Fantse worldview on childhood. It is pertinent to note that these worldviews are going through social change. However, this process of change is slow in many rural areas and some urban centres.

Children and childhood (re)defined

The standard definition of a child by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child

(ACRWC) is that of a person below the age of 18 years. The notions of childhood, based on this definition, is often informed by perceptions of the media, international organisations, and local non-governmental organisations which aim at rescuing children from danger (Khan 2010). Realising that the universal definition is not in tandem with the perceptions of childhood in many African societies, Twum-Danso (2005) lambasts governments of Africa who ratified the international treaties on childhood for not consulting the populace for their views before accepting the definition. She argued that for the ACRWC to stipulate that children have responsibilities towards their families, communities and states, means that Africans uphold the contribution of children towards the welfare of society.

This article concurs with the stand taken by Twum-Danso (2005; 2019) that childhood in many African contexts is more of a position and not a chronological age which terminates along with a person's biological development. It also subscribes to arguments I have made elsewhere (Wilson 2016: 150) which articulate that for the Fantse, one is a child as long as he or she is either a son or daughter to a parent and/or an unmarried person. In this paper, I maintain that this makes one a child throughout his or her life and in need of direction from members of the community in which he or she lives. Within the same context, one's position as a child leads an individual to have responsibilities to his or her parents and other members of the community in their old age. Accordingly, the Fantse conception of childhood is not about biological development and chronological age or one which perceives children in the contexts of 'deficits', but one which helps children to redefine themselves at various stages of their lives. In this situation, children are socialised to accept the fact that they are a major part of the social system and are capable to do many things for the family and community, according to the developmental stage that they have attained in life (Wilson 2016; 2020). For example, during the period of adolescence, a child may contribute his or her quota to running the affairs of the domestic household by helping to sweep the compound, fetching firewood, hunting for snails and mushrooms, and running errands for his or her parents and members of the household. When he or she starts working and is not yet married, he or she is expected to contribute to the domestic budget of his or her natal family, and may foster a younger sibling (Wilson 2011). The performance of these activities supports children to have self-confidence, in order to fit into the society and discharge their roles effectively for their personal development and for those of their communities. Also, childhood in this context is not always about a situation where a child is considered as weak and in need of support from adults, but a situation where a child can also support others in the community. Related to this is the recognition that childhood is also a phase in which individuals have the opportunity to speak for themselves and other children on issues that aim to develop a community. Taken from this point, this paper examines the construction of childhood within the theoretical frameworks of Fortes (1969) and social constructivists

(Vygotsky 1978). These analytical frameworks, which I discuss below, suggest that culture is critical to the construction of community affairs. It is, therefore, against this backdrop that this paper heavily draws on the two schools of thought to flesh out the cultural dimensions of childhood in Fantseland.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for this paper draws on the social constructivist theory advanced by Lev Vygotsky (1978) and 'the developmental cycle of the domestic group' advanced by Meyer Fortes (1969). It focuses more on the ideas of Fortes but intersperses these ideas with the views of social constructivism to justify the cultural dimensions of childhood. Social constructivism suits this article because it seeks to uncover the ways in which individuals and groups participate in the construction of their perceived social realities and associated values.

Social constructivism is 'a theoretical perspective that explores the ways in which 'reality' is negotiated in everyday life through people's interactions and through sets of discourses' (James & James 2008: 122). It foregrounds culture as a key source of knowledge in any community and examines the connections between a group of people and the sociocultural context in which its members act and interact in shared experiences (Vygotsky 1978). It upholds the principle that the society moulds individuals within the community in such a way that they behave according to the manners that the society has conditioned them. In reference to learning and childhood development, Vygotsky noted that children's learning abilities communicate the ways that they understand issues in the community in which they live.

To say that childhood is socially constructed means that the mode of construction differs from one society or context to another, and even within the same society, it depends on other social factors such as gender and social class (Norozi & Moen 2016). Also, the social construction of childhoods reflects variations in how cultures impute incompetence and 'completeness' or 'incompleteness' in the nature of the child. Therefore, various cultures assign different developmental tasks to children of the same biological ages (Nsamenang 2008; Prout & James 1990). In light of the foregoing, this paper explores the cultural dimension of the construction of childhood within the Fantse worldview, which upholds the way children perceive and understand their own realities within the society and its implications for child-based rights and responsibilities. Though, social constructivism has its own fair share of critiques, including that of Liu & Matthews (2005) who argue that Vygotsky's theory often arises from concepts taken literally with no appreciation for general philosophical orientation underpinning his works, these critiques are not the focus of this paper.

The structural functionalism school of thought, of which Fortes' developmental cycle falls within, coheres with the ideas of social constructivism, and that the cycle draws on the structures that condition childhood and adulthood. Fortes' (1969) developed an analytical framework for the debate about the 'domestic group' and its development. He explained that the domestic group is essentially a household which provides the cultural resources for maintaining and bringing up its members, and also splitting them through marriage. In other words, the pattern of residence provides the economic, affective, and jural bases for domestic groups and explains the mode by which society grows out of an individual child who is socialised to fit into a community.

First, Fortes (1969) identified two domains within which childhood is constructed in social systems—the private or domestic domain (formed through direct bonds of marriage, filiation and siblingship and viewed from within as an internal system), and the politico-jural domain (made up of all the people in a community and viewed from an external system other than the family). Out of these domains, Fortes identified four phases, the first three of which fall within the domestic domain. The first two phases, known together as the 'domestic infancy' are centred on the parents. The first phase is where a child is wholly contained within the matricentral cell. The child serves as an appendage to his or her mother in the social, affective, and physiological sense, and the mother serves as the link between him or her, and the society. Fortes (1969) noted that this phase begins from birth and may last for only a few days of post-partum seclusion. It may either be ritually terminated or merged subtly into the second phase where the child is accepted into the patricentral nuclear family unit. The father-husband assumes social and spiritual responsibility for his child and mother-wife.

After weaning, a child enters the third phase, which Fortes (1969) refers to as the jural infancy. At this stage, the child is no longer confined to his or her mother's quarters but has the freedom and is able to access the whole dwelling house and the surroundings. At this stage children come under the jural and ritual care of the head of the domestic group who may not even be their father but anyone within the domestic group who may be designated as the leader of the group. The child's rights to productive resources, such as housing, as well as ritual, political and/or jural institutions, are tied to those of the parents or designated leaders.

The domestic domain emphasises the stage of growth of a child and the associated capabilities. These capabilities are crafted in explicit gender roles, so each parent is influenced by his or her gender during the process of socialising their offspring. Fortes identified this as the phase of childhood proper and noted that this occurs over a relatively longer period. As domestic childhood draws to an end and jural childhood begins, the two phases merge and complement each other. However, jural infancy terminates when one develops one's own conjugal family or family of procreation. Jural childhood falls within both the family and community. Fortes (1969: 11–12) noted

that the third and fourth phases are complementary and interdependent: just when jural infancy draws to an end, jural childhood (also referred to as the politico-jural domain) begins.

Though there are clear distinctions between jural childhood and adulthood, every member of a society exists simultaneously in both. Fortes asserted that jural infancy is located in the domestic domain, but its attribute is defined by norms validated in the politico-jural domain. A major aim of socialisation of children is to shape them to replace their parents in their families and communities. Thus, children become agents of socialisation and they are conferred with the actual or potential autonomy to control some productive resources. They enjoy some level of jural independence and have access to ritual powers and institutions. It is common for the domestic domain to be legitimised through rites of passage. These rites, which also define the level of status attained, are communally owned, so members of the society accept the norms that define childhood. Thus, the author concurs with Fortes' ideas, noting that they resonate with the social constructivists' ideas and Fantse customs.

Contextual and theoretical analyses of Fantse worldview of childhood

Considering the above, and the fact that Fantse culture defines and appreciates the roles of children as a major social group who will, in future, replace the adults in society, this article triangulates the two theories to draw upon their implications for the determination of childhood roles and expectations. Again, in framing childhood among the Fantse, I consider the fact that the structural functionalism school of thought, of which Fortes' developmental cycle falls within, coheres with the ideas of social constructivism, and that the cycle draws on the structures that condition childhood and adulthood. Consequently, triangulation of the two viewpoints is convenient in articulating the arguments of this paper. Furthermore, structural functionalism indicates that individuals project miniature values of the culture of an entire community (Wilson 2020: 7). The call made by social constructivism adheres to culture in analysing a situation, while Fortes' ideas are also informed within the tenets of culture. Thus, both ideas support the view that culture matters in explaining every human institution, and this article follows this line of argument.

Childhood among the Fantse

Fortes' developmental cycle shows that childhood is defined in the cultural context, taking into consideration the biological growth and social formation within a household and community. Fortes' ideas do not wholly fit into what one might call the developmental cycle of the domestic group of the Fantse. For example, he stated

that the cycle begins after birth but for the Fantse, gestation is part of the period of childhood (Wilson 2016) because the child is endowed with the entities that makes it human—blood, spirit, and soul.[1] Moreover, Fortes couched the first two phases along a nuclear family system which is independent of a larger family group. However, a close observation of the Fantse family system is a composite one of which the nuclear family is an appendage. Despite these, Fortes' ideas are in line with Fantse culture and can best be used for explaining issues of childhood by taking cognisance of the concept of personhood and the rule of residence.

Personhood and childhood in Fantse social system

Among the Fantse, childhood is a bio-social construct that follows the concept of personhood (Gyekye 1996; Wilson 2016; Wiredu 2001). Personhood addresses the elements that constitutes a person and society's expectations of that person, while the rule of residence explains the relationships that exist among the people who live in a household and how a child grows in the household and community. Thus, the concept of personhood and Fortes' developmental cycle is sufficient for the recognition of children as major components of the society which ought to be protected, seen (recognised) and heard, and by so doing, respected. This article pinpoints some of the areas of digression, which call for reconstructing Fortes' ideas with regard to the culture of the Fantse.

Among the Fantse, personhood means that an individual is comprised of three major elements: blood, spirit, and soul. The blood is obtained from the mother, the spirit from the father and the Supreme Being gives the soul. Thus, a person's composition, or cultural anatomy, demonstrates two dimensions: the physical aspect (i.e. one obtaining blood from the mother) and a meta-physical dimension (i.e. obtaining spirit and soul from the father and the Supreme Being) (Gyekye 1996; Wilson 2016; Wiredu 2001). In the physical realm, children are deemed to be weak and vulnerable and need direction, protection, and proper socialisation in order to perpetuate the legacies of their families and culture (Botchway 2019). Fantse culture upholds this idea and assigns the community with the responsibility of a child's upbringing. However, the onus of socialising the child falls on the parents, siblings, and relatives who live with the child in the household as well as their neighbours, just as Fortes (1969) noted. The responsibilities of the community and the specific assignments given to close relatives allow the community to develop customs that ensure that children are protected and heard. Thus, in line with social constructivism, parents and their children play their respective roles to interpret the actions and events that occur in a community

[1] Nsamenang (2008) also identifies gestation as part of the stages of the development of a person among the Nso of Cameroun.

and conceptualise indigenous knowledge as a set of beliefs or mental models that the Fantse use to interpret their worldviews and actions within the community.

The spiritual realm of personhood casts children as creatures with a soul obtained from the Supreme Being and spirit from their fathers. A child is considered a 'divine gift' (Wilson 2016).[2] It is also believed to have sprung from ancestry as its spirit is believed to flow through the patrilineage. The links with ancestry through the father's lineage means that children belong to the socio-religious groups known as the *egyabosom* and *asafo.* Therefore, children have to observe taboos associated with their father's patrilineage.[3] There is the belief that children might have been reincarnated to deliver messages from the ancestors, or to continue with some duties assigned to them from the world of the ancestors. Because of this belief, children are at times considered as adults within the social structure (Botchway 2019: vii-ix; Sarpong 1974: 39–45). Apart from the *kra din* (soul name), which a child derives from the day on which he or she was born, the child is given a name which is also derived from either deceased or older members of the clan or community in order to show the link to ancestry. For this reason, titles such as Nana (Ancestor, Chief or Grandparent), Maame (Mother) and Papa (Father) and others, which are attributable to ancestry and old age, are added to their names and also, they are accorded some respect. And once they exist to complete an unfinished business of an ancestor, society is expected to listen to them.

Personhood makes a person aware of his or her social and moral obligations to the family or community. This awareness makes an individual reflect on what the society expects of him or her, shapes his or her conduct, and makes him or her have self-control.[4] Through these, a person becomes self-conscious and establishes an identity (a sense of belonging to a particular society) for himself or herself. With these attributes, the members of the family and community are expected to pay close attention to children as they grow, treat them fairly and accord them some respect. Therefore, they are not just seen (recognised) but also listened to and heard.

The four phases that Fortes identified in the developmental cycle exist among the Fantse construction of childhood and follows the concept of personhood. However, contrary to Fortes' assertion that the patricentral phase occurs after the matricentral phase, the concept of personhood shows that the two phases run concurrently and are initiated after conception (Christensen 1954; Wilson 2020). The concept of personhood illustrates that though a woman carries her own father's spirit, the spirit of her husband helps to form the foetus which she carries during pregnancy, so she comes

[2] Nsamenang (2008) also identified that with the Nso of Cameroun.

[3] Wilson (2007) noted that the *egyabosom* is weakly translated as father's deity. The Fantse believe that one's father is his or her spiritual guardian. The *asafo* is the social, political, and military organisation of the Fantse, and a child can belong only to his father's asafo and not that of his/her mother.

[4] Wilson (2016) provides details of Fortes ideas on personhood which he derived from many of Fortes' works.

under the bond of her husband's spirit and must observe the dietary taboos associated with her husband's spirit. Biological sciences acknowledge the natural attachment of a foetus to its mother's womb through the umbilical cord. The umbilical cord serves as a conduit for the foetus' nourishment. The Fantse uphold this tenet as well as the belief in the attachment of an imaginary substance known as *abadaa* in the extra sensory realm, connecting the foetus to the mother's womb (Wilson, 2016; 2020). Wilson (2020: 16–27) noted that a*badaa* is associated with women and is believed to be derived from the womb and breastmilk. *Abadaa* is weakly translated into English as mother's filial love or compassion, but the Fantse say that it is rather the substance that endows a mother with extreme filial love and compassion. Again, the Fantse state that usually, a mother's *abadaa* for a child exists throughout her life. After a wife informs her husband about the pregnancy, it is expected that a husband takes care of the physical and spiritual needs of both the mother and the child to ensure a safe delivery.

It is very difficult to understand why Fortes did not include the gestation period in the matricentral cell, especially when the child has no contact with the world. For the Fantse, the child exists in matricentral cell, and is dependent on its mother in the social, affective, and physiological sense. However, it also comes under the patricentral phase. The matricentral cell exists only because of the strong attachment of the child to his or her mother and the phase does not terminate into the patricentral phase. Whereas the period of matricentral cell exists during gestation, there cannot be a period in the child's development which is wholly centred on the father as a mother continues to play her roles, though society holds a father responsible for the upkeep of the child and its spiritual development. Thus, the matricentral cell which Fortes identifies, exists among the Fantse in the sense that the child really depends on the mother's umbilical cord and breast milk for nourishment, and her arms for physical protection. Also, one of the routines of child rearing is that a mother straps her baby to her back. There is also the belief that the toddler is able to determine the presence of his or her mother through smell. All these express the matrifilial bonds which the Fantse uphold and have to ensure that a child is accorded some respect and protection. However, the Fantse worldview is that, in spite of the strong matrifilial bonds, children depend on their father's spirit for spiritual protection. Hence, the matricentral and patricentral phases go together though each has its own threshold of operation.

Childbirth and child development have challenges including maternal and child mortality so successful delivery of a child is expected to bring joy signified by the presentation of gifts to mother and child from relatives. Before the out-dooring and naming ceremony of a child, which Fortes describes as the period of the matricentral cell, a father's responsibility to the child is mostly spiritual. The physical aspects are mostly performed through the mother, so they do not terminate the matricentral cell. The Fantse believe that the protection offered by the father's spirit is crucial because the child may die as those in the spirit world continue to lay claim to him or her within that period. In the early days after

birth, the child may be indoors, but he or she is also in contact with an elderly woman (normally, its maternal grandmother) who bathes him or her. The Fantse believe that this woman helps to mould the child's physique to what is culturally acceptable. Therefore, the matricentral and patricentral phases draw a link between the child and his or her lineage and community, and not only the mother as Fortes noted.

Also, before the child is out-doored, the father has to present some items to the mother and child, and affirm his paternal responsibilities to him or her, as well as the mother-wife (Ephirim-Donkor 1997; Wilson 2020). While the payment of bride-wealth establishes paternity, the gift items affirm paternity. After presenting the gifts, the father is expected to nurture and exhibit some level of compassion, similar to *abadaa* (an imaginary substance attached to the womb that impresses on the mother to be more compassionate to the child), though not in the same form as a woman will exhibit. All these reflect the conjugal bonds (between husband and wife) and filial bonds (between a parent and a child) as outlined by Fortes (1969), but not the delineation of matricentral cell from the patricentral unit.

The domestic domain is made up of domestic infancy and jural infancy (to use Fortes' own terminologies). However, for the sake of expediency, I use domestic childhood and jural childhood to emphasise the stage of growth of the child. Domestic childhood falls within the family while jural childhood falls within the family and community. This meets Fortes' claim that as domestic childhood draws to an end and jural adulthood begins, the two phases merge and complement each other. It is also so because the third phase fits more into only the family while the fourth phase fits into the family and community. However, beyond Fortes' claim is that in both phases, there are explicit gender roles for the parents as they help to socialise their sons and daughters. This supports James *et al.*'s (1998) assertion that childhood, as a variable of social analysis, can never be entirely separated from other variables such as class, gender, or ethnicity. Childhood is not about one's age but status and one's ability to reason and perform certain tasks within the family and community. The duties assigned are gender-based. In view of these, the next segment examines the rule of residence among the Fantse, specifically how the developmental cycle fits into the social systems.

Children and the Fantse residential system

The developmental cycle of the domestic group takes place in a household, so the process of socialisation depends on the rule of residence. Fantse residential systems are duolocal, neolocal and compound households (Wilson 2007).

The duolocal rule of residence, where married couples do not live together, offers another dimension of socialisation of children. Within this social system men live in the *prama* (male household) while women live in the *igyadze* (female household)

(Hagan 1983; Wilson 2007; 2020). The people in the *prama* often include agnates and their sons while those in the *igyadze* are sisters and their daughters and very young sons. Mothers and mothers' sisters are the main agents of socialisation for girls while the fathers and fathers' brothers are the primary agents of socialisation for boys. However, there is also a high rate of acculturation. In the *prama*, the boys perform their house chores and play around with their cousins.[5] When they join children from other households to play, the cousins are at first brothers before rivalry of any sort crops up. After play, they all troop home in one file. While at home, the boys observe their elder brothers, who are in the politico-jural domain, and their fathers receive visitors and perform customs.

As the boys move away from their mothers to the *prama*, the girls remain in the *igyadze* with their mothers but, they move away from private childhood to jural childhood. Within the jural domain the onus is on their mothers and mothers' sisters to socialise them within the female household (Wilson 2011). They connect to their fathers' lineages as they draw on the pieces of advice from their fathers' sisters. As the girls attain puberty, they are educated about the tasks of womanhood, their own sexuality and those of their would-be husbands, including the taboos and prohibitions associated with menstruation and reproduction, rules of marriage, dietary rules, and societal responsibilities and expectations (Ephirim-Donkor 1997; Oduro-Sarpong 2003). Whereas Europeans assign childcare solely to adults, Africans situate childcare training as a commitment for children to learn as part of their duties to their families (Nsamenang 2008). Amongst the Fantse, a girl is supposed to learn how to bathe herself from an early age and also to provide care to her siblings. By doing this, it is believed that she will learn new skills to build into what she already knew (Wadende *et al.* 2016). The age sets that develop after adolescence help to shape young men and women to perform tasks within their families and communities and thus make them participate effectively within the periods of domestic and jural infancy and the politico-jural domain.

At the jural childhood phase, both males and females are encouraged to take up domestic and community roles based on their individual strengths and capacities. Here, the boys are deemed to be of age (between the ages of 7–12) so they are expected to be segregated from women and girls and hence, they go to live with their fathers and their fathers' agnates in the *prama* (Hagan 1983; Wilson 2016). The period of segregation constitutes what Fortes refers to as the childhood proper. That is when the children are socialised to take up active roles in order to fulfil their family and community obligations. The roles within the domestic realms that children are expected to undertake are due to the need to prepare them for roles within the politico-jural

[5] For the Fantse, the replica of kin term 'cousin' does not exist. The boys are brothers because they are sons of agnates.

domain. While the younger ones play around and undertake their house chores, they are also expected to observe their elder brothers and fathers receive visitors and perform customs and, in this way, learn about their cultures. Older sons should be socialised to lead communal lives and take up the roles of *mbambayin*.[6] They are expected to join their fathers in the deliberations that take place in the *prama*, help to socialise the younger ones as they supervise them to perform their daily chores and accompany their fathers to the latter's *ebusuafie* (household for lineages and/or clans) for the purpose of participating in the deliberations that take place. This is a clear case of positive participation—one which improves children's self-confidence, self-esteem and skills, and supports mutual learning among children (Collins 2017). Positive participation makes children visible outside the private spheres of the family and schools and supports meaningful social development. Thus, the children are seen and heard, not only in matters affecting them but also those that affect their fathers and fathers' clans.

Jural childhood positions young men and women as children of the community instead of children of their parents as they participate actively in communal activities. For example, the young women perform *mpeewa* in order to exercise their bodies, educate the public and at times expose some of the wrongs in the community.[7] By performing *mpeewa,* members of the community get to know some of the evil deeds of the society. This makes the young men active as they take such matters up within the *asafo* and take action to correct those deeds.[8] The elders of the community get such information and act upon them to bring sanity into the society by punishing or rewarding people for their deeds. As the young men and women participate in the social and political activities, they develop certain morally desirable properties such as a sense of responsibility for themselves and for others (Wadende *et al.* 2016: 3). Taking up these moral responsibilities make their voices heard within their families and communities. Thus, adolescents and young men and women participate in decision-making affecting them as well as other members of their families and the entire community as they grow. It is worthy of note that *mpeewa* is gradually dying out as a result of social change associated with Western education and contemporary local government systems.

[6] See Wilson (2020: 21–30) for roles of *mbambayin* (sons of agnates). They serve their fathers and the fathers' matrilineages in various capacities, including social, political, and religious, and participate in the meetings of their fathers' agnates and matrilineages without any form of inhibition.

[7] *Mpeewa* is indigenous music and dance performance by young women. They gather at open spaces and sing songs most of which are love songs to express their love for their suitors, praise young men for their good deeds and also castigate those who have done evil in the society, especially those who abuse women.

[8] The *asafo* provides avenues for members of a community to present their views on issues. The socialisation of children in the *asafo*, makes them develop the art of speaking and activism for political participation.

The age sets that develop after adolescence help to shape young men and women to perform tasks within their families and communities and thus make them participate effectively within the periods of domestic and jural infancy and the politico-jural domain. Also, the unity and solidarity among the *mbambayin* (sons of agnates) make them feel protected as they can act in unison to claim their rights from their fathers' clans under the rules of the double unilineal descent. The physical and spiritual attachment of *mbambayin* to their fathers and father's brothers and sisters and the *prama* (household occupied by agnates) makes them feel that they are protected physically and spiritually (Wilson 2020: 27–31).

In addition to role and tasks in the community in the domestic domain, irrespective of the rule of residence, children are expected to play among themselves and show their capabilities of taking decisions for themselves and helping adults. This is seen as part of the socialisation process as it enables them to learn how to cooperate with others as they make their own handiworks and share them with others. It is envisaged that through this process children will set roles and rules for themselves for the contribution of resources for making and using the handicrafts. Through developing their toys, it is believed that they will develop their abilities and their personalities, express their points of view, plan and organise their own activities. Developing these behaviours and skills is seen as important as it can help to reduce conflicts and provide non-standard solutions to problems (Doyla 2010; Nsamenang 2006).

If conflicts do arise, children are expected to apply the rules that they have set for themselves to resolve them. If they cannot resolve the conflicts by themselves, there is an understanding that they should solicit the help of peers or adults, who are not part of the playing activity, to enforce them. In mediating the conflict, these new actors are supposed to find a resolution that draws on the rules that the children involved in the activity have set for themselves. Additionally, the mediators are encouraged to demonstrate an adherence to the principles of fair play, natural justice, and the tenets of culture as they ensure that their judgement inures to the best interest of the children. The children's ability to sharpen their reasoning power and make rules for themselves is meant to equip them with the cultural tools to analyse the realities of life and to recognise their self-worth. All these factors have the potential to make the children believe in themselves and their own capabilities. They develop a form self-identity based on what they can do and associate themselves with others in similar capacities. This self-identity gives them the confidence and motivates them to share their views with others. Through this, they make their views about themselves and others in the community heard.

The socialisation process emphasises the need to teach children to perform tasks based on their ages and ability as well as protect the weak and vulnerable in society. In sibling relationships, older children are expected to have responsibilities to protect the younger ones. Additionally, parents are supposed to equip their children with the tools to avoid abuse. For instance, onus is placed on parents and caregivers to teach

children that they should avoid abusers in the community and outright strangers. When parents see that their children are morose, dejected or stressed out or have dried tears on their faces, they are charged with the responsibility to first find out what had happened. If a case of abuse or mistreatment is reported by the child, depending on the circumstances, mothers and caregivers in particular, are called upon to investigate thoroughly and fight the parents of the abusive child. These encourage children to resist abuse and help to protect him or her from abuse.

Children and the care of the aged

The indigenous duolocal system offers support to members of the kin group, and ensures that care is provided to the aged, in particular. However, the joint neolocal residential system does not give such support in the same quantum as that of the duolocal system. As a result, many migrants send their children to their aged parents who also live in neolocal households to be socialised. This ensures that grandchildren provide care and support to their grandparents in the absence of the adult generation. Many children have embraced caregiving for their grandparents as a commitment (Frahauf & Orel 2008: 210–1); hence, such services cannot be underestimated.

An ethnographic research study conducted by Douglas Frimpong-Nnuroh,[9] identified a number of ways by which grandchildren use their ingenuity to provide care for their grandparents. For example, the grandparents in the study indicated that their grandchildren serve as companions and confidants and relieve them of emotions. Moreover, the grandchildren perform their house chores without much supervision from their grandparents as they set rules among themselves to ensure that everyone does his or her chores. In case of violation, the grandparents judge them based on the rules that the grandchildren have set for themselves. Thus, the grandparents are rather dependent on their grandchildren for care. Here, as the grandchildren are seen, and as they actively and positively participate in these activities in the household, they are also heard because they make the rules. Above all, the grandparents respect their grandchildren as the grandchildren serve as their confidants and their activities heal them emotionally.

[9] Douglas Frimpong-Nnuroh's research (under development) was conducted among the Ellembelle Nzema, an ethnic group in the Western Region of Ghana. He has given me the permission to use the information. Though, the result may be different from those of the Fantse, it is worthy of note that the Nzema are also Akan and live close to the Fantse, so they have cultural practices that are similar to those of the Fantse.

Childhood among the Fantse as rights-based phenomenon

Indigenous Fantse culture is not at odds with human rights discourses. Instead, there are elements of the culture that can work together with principles of human rights to ensure children's wellbeing. Some aspects of the Fantse worldview about childhood and children such as the moral expectations associated with personhood ensure that Fantse children enjoy their rights and perform their duties as well. The fact that a person derives his or her soul from God, noted earlier in this article, means that the Fantse believe that every human being has an equal measure of the God-given soul, and hence, everyone has an aspect of God within him or her. The soul endows every child with equal measure of human rights (Wilson 2016; Wiredu 2001). But these rights are not in abstract. Someone must provide them as a responsibility.

Because the family is the major social and political organisation, it is accorded the responsibility to see to the fulfilment of rights. In order that families do not trample upon these rights, the indigenous state has the onus, to ensure that every clan accords its members and those connected to it by marriage to be accorded their rights. Since the governments of the indigenous states are composed of representatives of the various clans, the representatives ensure that the state does not also trample upon the rights of the individuals in the clan. This is one of the checks and balances in indigenous politics. With the rights accorded children, coupled with their roles and capabilities to make rules for themselves, Fantse children are not children of deficits, but those that are seen, heard and protected in Fantse social systems.

Conclusion

In addressing the mundanities of childhood in Africa, this article concurs that childhood is a bio-social construct. The article has supported the views of authors such as Twum-Danso (2005); (2019) that the Western conception of childhood as a state or phase characterised by innocence, dependence, vulnerability, and lack of participation in the larger social fabric, is incongruous with Fantse customs. Additionally, it has taken exception to the widely held idea by many non-governmental and international organisations that children of Africa are often abused and marginalised because they do not participate in decisions affecting their well-being as noted by Oduro-Sarpong (2003).

As a right-based phenomenon, Fantse children are taught to uphold their duties to work for the cohesion of their families and, respect their parents, superiors and elders at all times. They are also enjoined to assist the elderly when the latter are in need. In effect, they participate in activities reserved for them and they set their own rules for participation. As they do these, they talk about their own needs and interests as well

as those of the community. Thus, indigenous structures that allow children to express their views on matters that affect them exist. These mean that, against the backdrop that children of Africa are only seen but not heard, the Fantse worldview seeks to ensure that children are seen, heard, and protected in the course of their socialisation.

The article calls for a greater understanding of Fantse customs to help to examine the myriad complex issues relating to children as the customs and laws enjoin parents and communities to ensure the well-being of their children. Both customs and laws recognise the strengths and weaknesses of every individual child and entreat society to accord children some respect and protect them from abuses. They perceive children as part of the structures of the society and childhood as a process. This process is expected to end with the marriage of a person. However, since childhood is also connected with being the son or daughter of another person, it does not end till a person dies. Furthermore, these indigenous customs see children as capable of participating in family and community activities. Thus, the Fantse use motivation to construct acceptable behaviour as adults engage children in goal-directed values.

Though, some Fantse children may be marginalised, the way adults use the rules that the children have set for themselves to encourage them to participate in decision-making about matters that affect them is the thrust of this article. With the diversity of childhood outlined in this article, one can apply the Fantse model to examine the concept of childhood in other indigenous cultures in Ghana. Stakeholders should encourage children to uphold the duty of assisting their families and communities as this averts the perception of childhood as a period associated with innocence and weakness, but also one in which children are incapable of providing care. The larger context of the social systems should be considered for ensuring compliance with child rights documents, while society teaches children the customs and laws that uphold children's rights and duties in contemporary contexts.

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