Children as peacemakers in transforming everyday conflicts in Ghana

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Abstract: African children are often reported in news and publications as child soldiers, dabbling in drug use, indoctrinated to commit violent assaults, and living in poverty. While these occurrences have been recorded in conflicts around the continent, the dominance of such narratives erases both the active and silent roles children play in advancing peace through everyday childhood practices. The generalisation creates a single and narrow description of the African child. This article explores the peace-making practices of Ghanaian children in their homes, communities, schools, and other spaces and seeks to understand why and how these roles are downplayed. The article proposes ways of shoring up this powerful image of African children through their socio-cultural environments and indigenous knowledge. It is important that the narrative of Ghanaian childhood is re-told to reflect these potential peace-making perspectives because they have implications for citizens' participation, and stability in Ghana.

Keywords: Peace-making, conflict, citizens' participation, Ghanaian childhoods, indigenous knowledge.

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Introduction: unpacking the narrative on the African child, peace, and conflict

Blaise, a former child combatant, who led a battalion of 800 men to fight other militias at the young age of 13 years, has remarkably transitioned into a new life as a peace worker. He has innovatively rescued over 1500 child soldiers from militia and rebel camps (Peace Direct 2016). The African continent, like many other regions of the world, abounds in volatile and latent conflicts. Often, in reports about Africa, conflicts and particularly their adverse impact on children predominate. Global reports and publications often cite children and women as the victims of conflicts (Sideris 2003; Save the Children 2020; 2019; 2018; UNICEF 2021). There are chilling accounts of children rescued from the camps of rebel soldiers as in the story of Blaise above. These accounts have attracted humanitarian aid and changed national and international policies. The challenge is when these become the only way in which the life of African children is perceived or understood. If such narratives are not balanced with other aspects of African childhoods, they could provide a skewed account of the child in conflict, and even in everyday life, and contribute to the generalisation of childhoods in Africa. Rather than *peace journalism* (Lynch 2007; Galtung 2003), *war journalism* becomes prevalent, and the African child is placed in the 'victim of war' narrative. Multiple narratives are useful in creating a complete picture of both the everyday lives and the dire circumstances African children encounter in life.

Like the story of Blaise above, some of the skewed narrative is shifting. A number of authors have highlighted the transition of child soldiers to peace actors (Deluca *et al.* 2014: 126–35; Machakanja 2014: 85–108). These are important narratives. They cause a shift from a societal condemnation as 'child soldier', to demonstrating the resilience of African children, their ability to transition from conflicts, and be reintegrated into society. However, the dominant narrative is still one in which the African child is perceived as a victim of conflict and violence, wallowing in economic deprivation, and facing a bleak future. In their introductory chapter, Deluca *et al.* (2014: 109) observe, 'we begin [Matadi's] story as a vulnerable child bereft of parents caught in the maelstrom of Liberia's civil war.' The authors capture the predominant narrative, but go on to demonstrate the emerging shift in peace and conflict narratives. There are still not enough stories that show how the African child prevents conflict, and builds peace in their everyday lives, within or without violent conflicts.

Ghana has not experienced a protracted, nationwide armed conflict in recent history. However, conflict, defined as a pervasive characteristic of human life (Tillett 1999), including everyday disagreements or altercations is relevant to the Ghanaian context. It may or may not be violent, but it can provide the opportunity for transformation (Fisher *et al.* 2020), and, therefore, has the potential to facilitate peace-making. It is in these everyday conflicts that this article highlights the peace-making roles

of Ghanaian children, occurring in their homes, communities, schools, and other socio-cultural spaces. The emphasis of this article is, therefore, more on the everyday peace-making efforts rather than interventions in armed or violent conflicts.

Geopolitically, Ghana is situated in a sub-region that has experienced several protracted conflicts and other forms of political instability in neighbouring countries such as Côte d'Ivoire, Togo, and Nigeria. Ghana has also accepted refugees globally, sometimes based on ethnocultural and historical ties as well as commitments to international protocols. According to the United Nations refugee agency, UNHCR, Ghana hosts refugees and asylum seekers from over thirty countries with women and children being the majority in the demography of refugees in Ghana, fleeing from fear of persecution or aggression in their countries of origin.[1] So, although Ghanaian children are not caught up in violent conflicts, as Suleiman (2017) argues, what may be external affects the local and has the potential to change internal stability, suggesting that global conflicts can 'complicate local conflict ecologies' (p. 316), in relatively peaceful places like Ghana. Ghana is, therefore, in the position to experience some of the spill-over of conflicts in other countries. Internally, Ghana has experienced sporadic conflicts such as the Alavanyo–Nkonya incidences, chieftaincy conflicts in northern Ghana (see Bukari *et al.* 2021), the farmers–Fulani herdsmen unrests (see Olaniyan *et al.* 2015) and other ethnic clashes, as well as occasional religion-based disagreements such as, between Christian denominations and traditional leaders or between small sections of Muslims and Christians in specific localities (see Suleiman 2017). These are all forms of conflicts, but none have escalated into a nationwide protracted conflict. They mostly become 'hot spots' during key national events such as elections. To this extent, Ghana is overall considered a stable country that fosters a relatively peaceful co-existence within multiple ethnic groups and religious persuasions (Suleiman 2017) and demonstrates greater cultural integration than other African countries.

What is it in the fabric of Ghanaian society that mitigates violent conflicts and maintains relative peace in spite of all the socio-economic and political challenges? This article cannot address all of the possible factors that could address this question. However, it posits that the upbringing of Ghanaian children and their socio-cultural environment could be a contributory factor to the low intensity of conflicts in Ghana and this can potentially characterise Ghanaian children as peacemakers. While this is not intended to suggest that every single child is a peacemaker, this perspective points to the gaps in the narrative on African childhoods and particularly suggests that the peacemaker qualities in Ghanaian children is missing, in discourses on conflicts.

The article does not only seek to understand why and how these peace roles are downplayed, but particularly proposes ways of shoring up this powerful image of the

[1] https://www.unhcr.org/gh/who-we-help-2/refugees/

Ghanaian child. While acknowledging children as one of the marginalised groups across the world, including in Africa, this article challenges an over generalisation of such assertions that supresses the civic capacity in children and proposes a deepening of peace education that is anchored in African, and for that matter Ghanaian, socio-cultural practices. Without being oblivious to cultural practices that stifle children's voices, and undermine participation, the article offers ways of upholding the positive values undergirding such practices, while empowering children to realise their full potentials as active citizens and peacemakers in both places of conflict and apparent peace. Like Abebe & Ofosu-Kusi (2016), this article does not seek to romanticise Africa, and for that matter Ghana, as a special childhood arena. That will be 'othering' Africa and reproducing a form of the dominant global narrative, even if positive. Unlike Abebe & Ofosu-Kusi (2016), however, this article will indigenise some of the traits in Ghanaian children, that qualify them for peace-making, by demonstrating how those features could be traced to factors in the upbringing and socialisation of African children. This is important because part of the war narrative about Africa is drawn from historical descriptions of Africans as 'warriors' living in a terrain prone to conflict. A different narrative from an Afrocentric perspective (Owusu-Ansah & Miji 2013; Asante 2007; 2020) and particularly from the framework of indigenous practices and local epistemologies, is important. This article, therefore, advocates more indigenous peace efforts, situated in positive Ghanaian cultures and traditions.

Methodology

This article utilises secondary research to a) demonstrate the dominant narrative that presents African children as victims of conflict, actors of, and in, violence; and b) explore alternative narratives of Ghanaian children as peacemakers anchored in Ghanaian and African practices and environments. The article addresses these through a systematic literature review.

Literature search

Based on the problem discussed above, the literature search was guided by two research questions: What are the dominant narratives on African children during conflict? Are there other narratives to demonstrate the multiplicity of experiences of Ghanaian children as peacemakers? The main search engines utilised were iDiscover (Cambridge LibGuides/Cambridge Libraries) and ProQuest, supplemented by Google Scholar, which provided grey literature and listed current peacebuilding literature. The key search engine concepts were 'children as peacemakers', 'peacebuilding', 'children and conflict in Africa', 'childhoods in Africa', and 'African relationality'.

Although there was no limit in terms of the publication date, most of the reviewed literature fell within the last three decades when intra-state conflicts increased across the African continent with dire effects on children. It is also the period within which key protocols on children were developed by agencies such as the United Nations, the African Union, and governments at the country level.

Screening for inclusion and eligibility

Relevance of identified literature was assessed first from the title, and then the abstract, to determine the extent to which it advances the research questions, following which the full reference was sourced and documented. The search prioritised journal articles and books by authors from the African region and those who have studied and worked in Africa extensively. This was to provide an 'insider perspective' on the narrative of African children and highlight overlooked perspectives. Authors outside of the African region, were mainly included to provide psychoanalytic perspectives about children and dominant peace theories. The sampling strategy was selective and purposive, intended to highlight the deficiencies in the existing body of work, and surface alternative narratives. Following a coarse sieve screening, the article identified about 40 core bibliography based on the criteria established, and highlighting children's roles in families and the community, children and conflicts in Africa, and African epistemologies. This is supplemented by anecdotal insights, gathered at the start of this research through informal telephone conversations with a few Ghanaian parents to explore the relevancy of the argument in the Ghanaian context. This was not an intentional data collection method and, therefore, was not structured around any specific data sampling. The insight is used here only anecdotally, supported by evidence found in the literature The search also included data from non-governmental organisations that focus on children's welfare, as well as other 'grey literature'.

Data extraction, analysis and usage

This article employed a hybrid of descriptive reviews—a critical review to support the argument that narratives on African children are skewed to depict them as victims and actors in conflict, and a narrative review, to demonstrate the potential for alternative perspectives. Some of the systematic review is used as background information to illustrate the problem and substantiate anecdotal information. Overall, this article interrogates the constructivist and single-focus notions around African children, by broadening perspectives around the peace-making roles in Ghanaian childhoods.

The legal framework and children's agency

The article applies the definition of a child, as stipulated in article 2 of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, (ACRWC) (African Union 1990), adopted by the then Organisation of Africa Unity (OAU), now African Union (AU), and Ghana's Children's Act (Act 560 of 1998), which is, every human being below the age of 18 years. The discussions are also anchored within Ghana's commitment to regulatory and legal frameworks on children's rights, being the first country in the world to ratify the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations 1989). The rights of children are well articulated in Ghana's 1992 constitution, finding expression in the Children's Act of 1998. These legal frameworks highlight the recognition and role of children in society and in relation to peace. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states '... in accordance with the principles proclaimed in the Charter of the United Nations, that suggests that, recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.' It further adds that '... the child should be ... brought up in the spirit of peace, dignity, tolerance, freedom, equality and solidarity ...' (United Nations 1989: 1). This was at the time, the most widely ratified treaty in history and it makes significant promises to accord children respect and voice, and recognises them, not as objects, but human beings with rights.[2] The ACRWC also reaffirms the status of the child. It embraces civil, political, economic and cultural rights of the child. It is instructive that the Charter's preamble highlights, in relation to the African child, consideration for 'the virtues of their cultural heritage, historical background and the values of the African civilization.' While the language of the Charter also contributes to the narrative of 'vulnerability', it grants and recognises the agency of the child—article 32, (responsibilities of the child to family, community, and nation), and articles 7, 8, and 9 (freedoms of the child). Ghana's Children's Act on the other hand leans heavily towards child protection, state responsibility and addressing offences against children. It is worth noting that exploring responses to the vulnerability of children is of utmost importance. These are critical in safeguarding children. However, without the express recognition of the roles children can, and indeed, do already play in Ghanaian culture, the child is again presented as only vulnerable and their contributions, including the ability to contribute to peace and stability, obscured. A balance in addressing vulnerability while exploring appropriate levels of agency in children is useful.

In spite of the legal provisions that create space for children to express their potentials, narratives about African childhoods barely capture such agency. The narrative on Africa is one of conflict, famine, hunger, mortality—mainly what may be termed

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[2] https://www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention

'afro-pessimism' (Wilderson 2020; Wekker 2020; Abebe & Ofosu-Kusi 2016). Conflict reporting is prevalent, and focuses on instability, to the neglect of peace journalism which highlights everyday efforts by citizens towards restoring harmony. Even in places of relative peace such as Ghana, the general reportage still presents children and the youth as the obvious group exploited by politicians in election seasons,[3] while in places of armed conflicts, children are perceived as recruits for war lords and rebels. These perspectives are influenced by the interface of the history of the African continent as an enslaved territory, and global narratives around the need to redeem and develop the continent (see Twum-Danso Imoh 2016; Twum-Danso & Ame 2012)—a narrative shaped by both Western development perspectives and Africa's own persistent narratives of lack. Such narratives do not capture the entirety of the life of the Ghanaian child as it evolves from infancy to adulthood, in a process that is not linear but one that is cyclical and relational (see Smørholm 2016). Children's everyday lives are impacted by social transformations in what Abebe & Ofosu-Kusi (2016: 309) call a 'constant becoming'. There is need for a narrative that presents a comprehensive account of what African children embody. Such narrative must accord the child their dignity as observed in the preamble to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the story ought to be balanced by African epistemologies. For the Ghanaian child, their means of knowing and ability to act as responsible citizens is shaped by their family, social interactions and relationships in their communities informed by their history and cultural heritage. Gyekye (1997: 9), suggests that such a cultural context is shaped by long-preserved traditions and practices. Participation in community life, therefore, informs one's wellbeing, identity and potential (p. 10) and the common good (p. 11).

Peace making and the Ghanaian socio-cultural environment

Relationships and interconnectedness are important concepts in African cultures, and they impact wellbeing and societal harmony (see Wissing *et al.* 2020; Gyekye 1997). Owusu-Ansah & Miji (2013) suggests that wholeness, community, and harmony are deeply embedded in African cultures and are the hallmark of African relationality. African relationships embody that which exists between a person and other people, between people and their environment as well as between people and their spirituality. To maintain harmony is to keep these relationships afloat and sustained. Such harmony is the intent of peace-making. As Gyekye (1997: 12) observes, 'there is no human being who does not desire peace'. The communitarian society, as exists in Africa, cherishes harmony and mutual sympathies (1997: 37) because of the notion

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[3] https://aceproject.org/ace-en/topics/em/elections-and-youth/the-case-of-ghana

that what happens to one affects the whole. In African cultures, there is a shared goal to pursue and uphold these values (1997: 8).

Peace-making is simply an effort to restore relationships. It requires a willingness to relate to another, to dialogue, and to seek harmonious solutions. It is both a preventative measure and a conflict transformation tool, best integrated in everyday lives (see Verbeek 2008). The United Nations describes peace-making both as a process involving diplomatic actions from States or envoys to address conflicts,[4] and efforts by non-state actors to promote peace. Peace-making in this article alludes more to the role of non-state actors and the citizenry (including children) in ensuring peace. Compared to other peace operations (such as peacebuilding, peacekeeping, peace enforcement and conflict prevention) peace-making offers opportunities to address everyday conflicts. This is particularly relevant in the Ghanaian contexts where there have not been protracted armed conflicts requiring other forms of peace support operations. It is useful to perceive peace in Ghana as a state of total wellbeing that embodies socio-cultural political and economic circumstances. The need for peace making is intrinsically linked to the core African cultural value of relationship building and the concept of *Ubuntu* which Ramphele (2017: 108) suggests 'imposes an inescapable ethical and moral code on our relationships.' There is a sense of collective responsibility in upholding these values through everyday practices that foster respect, suggesting that survival depends on interconnectedness and harmony with the other and collective responsibility, as a 'collective ethic' (Owusu-Ansah & Miji 2013: 2), is central to this world view and, hence, central to raising children in Africa. Gyekye (1997: 35) describes these as 'principles of communitarian morality' exemplified by compassion, interdependence, solidarity, cooperation, reciprocity and social wellbeing. The emotional wellbeing of children also tends to be enhanced through support from peers and relationships with adults (Salifu Yendork & Somhlaba 2017, cited in Wissing *et al.* 2020).

This article proposes that notions of peace-making can particularly be found in Ghanaian proverbs, norms, and practices and in environments that can shape children into potential peacemakers. Historically, these have served as avenues to transmit societal values. The following proverbs illustrate this perspective. The Akan[5] proverb, *ti koro nko agyina,* often explained as two heads are better than one, or that one person does not hold counsel, suggests the need to dialogue with others in decision-making. Dialogue is a useful tool in resolving disagreements and finding a common ground for action. It reduces individualism and promotes the collective—a key element in many African cultures, as discussed above, and a key approach to peace-making, a process that requires parties working together to find mutually beneficial solutions.

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[4] https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/terminology

[5] Akan is the largest ethnic group in Ghana, and the Akan language is the most widely spoken language in Ghana with several mutually intelligible dialects.

The collective is further illustrated by the Ga[6] proverb *loo pii fitee wonu*, which literally translates as, the soup is not ruined by a lot of meat/fish. This expresses the need for pluralism, a notion that encourages multiple voices, and narratives that enrich society and encourage peaceful co-existence. Similarly, *mokome efee man* in Ga, suggesting one (person) makes not a people or town implies that it is the collective that forms a community or nation. Such community and civic awareness are useful in peace-making. It highlights the connectivity in African cultures, and the quest to preserve these, which involves peace-making.

A key source of knowledge and wisdom on peace-making can be revealed within everyday interactions between Ghanaian children and adults. Parents, uncles and aunties, close and distant relatives and friends impart knowledge to children, as they recount daily events. Nana Clemensen (2016) suggests that children acquire language, cultural skills, and competencies as they interact with adults and with their environment through actions such as observation, eavesdropping on the conversations of adults and learning from peers (see also Nsamenang 2008). In her ethnographic field-work among families in Zambia, Clemensen (2016) reflects on how children contribute to their community and family lives through farming, access to the stories, work and ambiguities of daily lives, sibling care and household chores. Children are not passive in these socio-cultural interactions. Through these, they contribute to the socio-cultural, economic, and political lives of their communities. They shape the environment as the social structures impact them and shape children's agency (see Smørholm 2016). Abebe & Ofosu-Kusi (2016) explain that children engage in work (see also Tetteh 2011), head households, advise their peers and make life decisions that impact them and others, in a constant growth and interdependence. It is within these everyday activities that other human characteristics such as disagreements and sometimes violence occurs and require mediating efforts, including peace-making. Children do not detach at this stage. They engage in such occurrences, as a natural continuum of the lives both they and adult members of the community live.

In their article, 'Some Roles Children Play in their Families,' Rollins *et al.* (1973) observed the relationship between a child's intrapsychic development and the family as a social system. The authors identified four roles of children namely, the scapegoat, the baby, the pet, and the peacemakers. They further observed that there are elements of peace-making in the three other roles. The study, affirms the fact that children pick up roles in their family contexts. Sometimes they extend this to school and other social settings. Referring to Ackerman's (1958) discussion of social role and its relationship to individual personality, Rollins *et al*. described a child's social role as their social identity within the context of a particular life situation—a link between society and the individual (in Rollins *et al.* 1973). Referencing Spiegel (1968: 393),[7] Rollins *et al.*

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[6] Language of the Ga ethnic group in Ghana.

[7] Cited in Rollins *et al.* (1973).

describe role as a sequence of acts 'tailored by the cultural process', including the environments children grow in (in Rollins *et al.* 1973: 512).

Exploring narratives on the peace-making qualities in Ghanaian children[8]

Hosny *et al.* (2020), using a story-stem method, qualitatively explored various aspects of everyday lives of Ghanaian primary school children. Among these were the empathetic understanding of children and culturally embedded values, such as care-giving and family duties. It is not unusual to hear Ghanaian parents describe a child as 'being supportive of parents', 'the considerate one', 'not self-centred' or 'she/he calms me down'. These expressions of empathy, as Hosny explains, is critical to peace-making skills, and help to prevent, resolve, and transform conflict. In informal telephone conversations with some Ghanaian parents at the start of this research to help explore alternative narratives of Ghanaian childhoods, some of these peace-making skills energed. A parent talked about her child's reluctance to have her parents query school authorities about the school's failure to implement the child's dietary programme, which had been mutually agreed between the parents and the school. It appeared that the daughter understood the dynamics of the school better, and was, hence, better placed to determine the best approach to address the issue. In peace-making, one may say she assessed and understood the context of the conflict, which then informed the best approaches towards resolution. She offered to speak to the teachers herself. This diffused any potential conflict. Is the child's refusal to have her parents confront the school authorities borne out of fear of being victimised by her teachers for 'reporting them to parents' or perhaps anxiety over the fact that the confrontation will lead to a focus on her weight issues and possibly generate teasing and mocking from peers? Are there gender undertones, worth exploring?[9] Will a boy child respond differently? There is enough evidence around the depressing silence and trauma children experience when they have been threatened through bullying, sexual assault, and other traumatic experiences in Ghana and across Africa (see Oduro *et al.* 2012; Arhin *et al.* 2019). Such traumatic silence ought to be differentiated from peace-making which is not silence but an active effort to find non-violent solutions.

[8] This section draws on a few anecdotal insights based on informal conversations with some Ghanaian parents (May 2021). It is not a generalisation, but rather, indicative of the potential in Ghanaian children, substantiated by the systematic literature review and underscoring the need to explore multiple narratives of the Ghanaian child.

[9] As indicated in the methodology, these were casual exploratory conversations at the start of the research; incidentally the participants (colleagues) happen to be parents of girls. As this was not conscious data sampling with the necessary ethical clearance, I cannot make claims on the gender dimensions of the responses. That will require further gender disaggregated work.

In another instance, a parent observed:

> In school children pick on her, for her size. She would come and report to me. I told her to fight back but she actually didn't. Rather she ... was generous to the bullies ... she is friends with the bullies.

This child employed non-violent tactics to restore peace between her and her school mates. According to the parent she (the child) presents her opinion and listens to others; 'she always hugs when she fights with her brother and the issue is resolved', the parent added. Listening is a critical skill in peace dialogues. It demonstrates respect and recognition of the other. These are also the core elements of the African interconnectedness discussed above. Peace-making is also often marked by a symbolic gesture, such as a handshake or a hug as this child demonstrated. Asked how the child came by such peace-making techniques, the mother responded, it is a trait she observed from the father's behaviour at home. The father talked through issues amicably to find solutions. Another parent suggested her daughter picked up such peace-making skill from her grandmother. There was hardly any reference to the school system imparting such skills except a reference to the application of these skills in school. A parent recounted a case in which her daughter, as school prefect, had reported a bullying incident to her teacher, but did not think the punishment the teacher prescribed—having the perpetrators kneel, was enough. The daughter insisted that more ought to be done to address the abusive language employed by one of the boys involved. Consequently, the teacher invited the parents of the boy to talk over the problem. The parent of the offended girl observed, 'I teach my children to set standards, and to know when to speak up.'

While not representative of every Ghanaian child, the above examples highlights Cribari-Assali's (2019) explanation of how children are able to resolve their own conflicts given the chance, and overtime, master these skills. The children described in these Ghanaian contexts were skilful in picking up the 'early warning signs' of potential conflicts and responded with non-aggressive methods. They took a step towards talking through the problem and finding collective solutions, as peace making requires, and consistent with African relationality. According to Rollins *et al.* (1973: 512) such reconciliatory behaviour of children helps to provide equilibrium in the home, minimising conflict and making co-existence possible.

While the examples above highlight individual experiences, and provide insights that may not be extensively documented and systematically analysed among various groups of children in Ghana, they provide anecdotal evidence which suggests children experience various forms of conflicts, often quickly resolved, and remarkably, mediated by their peers. They often apply peace-making skills acquired from their socio-cultural environment, however these are often lost in conflict narratives. These provide a basis to explore alternative narratives on the peace-making role and capacities of Ghanaian children, that may not align with the dominant perspectives.

A new peace and conflict narrative on African children is possible

Humanitarian organisations are beginning to document stories of African children beyond conflicts. The stories of Matadi in Liberia (Deluca *et al.* 2014: 109–18) and Luca, in Congo (Autesserre 2021: 12) are instructive. Abducted into armed groups during the wars in these countries, both Matadi and Luca (pseudonym) struggled to be reintegrated, because they did not return to peaceful homes. Luca was abducted when he was just five years of age, and released at eight years. With poverty and war still waging in Congo, little Luca kept running back to the militia group, influenced by the indoctrination, that, he can get what he wants, when backed by gun violence. It was not until a social enterprise model of local peacebuilding, that provided his mother a means of livelihood, was introduced in his village in South Kivu, that Luca began to live a peaceful life, and contribute to building his community (Autesserre 2021). Matadi, also kept returning to the bushes of rebels in Liberia, until he decided to relocate to Ghana, in order to be in a flourishing environment. Matadi later founded the Initiative for the Development of Former Child Soldiers (IDEFCOS), an organisation to integrate former child soldiers back into society. So, even in places of violent conflicts, there are narratives beyond children as victims and actors of war. Matadi's story is particularly interesting given his immersion in Ghanaian culture, when he settled in the Buduburam camp for Liberian refugees and sought to change his life. He was inevitably impacted by Ghanaian children and the communal environment. Referring to his stay in Ghana, the authors observed '[t]his was an important transition because Matadi moved beyond thinking exclusively about himself to thinking about other child groups as a community' (Deluca *et al.* 2014: 112).

When asked about becoming a peacemaker, Matadi talked about the family. In his explanation, his journey of becoming a peacemaker crystallised when he was reunited with his extended family following the internationally-led 1995 Liberia peace process. During this period in Monrovia, he experienced the love of family and community, recognising that life in a rebel group was not 'normal' (Deluca *et al.* 2014: 111). During his re-integration process, Matadi felt that he belonged to his traditional family (Deluca *et al.* 2014). These stories demonstrate that, given the right environment, the peace-making abilities of African children do emerge. These abilities are not restricted to poor settings. Even in affluent homes, many African children have an early conceptualisation of what is peaceful and what is hardship. At the Buduburam camp in Ghana, 'Matadi moved beyond thinking exclusively about himself to thinking about other child groups as a community' (Deluca *et al.* 2014: 112). The option to be cooperative and considerate of others is potentially a capability of the African child and also a trait that children learn from the extended

family system, regardless of their socio-economic conditions (see Forster 2010). While this may be true of children everywhere, in situations of conflict and particularly in the lives of former child soldiers, competition and revenge is rife, as Matadi observes about his struggles to stay alive and safe during his re-integration process and in the refugee camp (Deluca *et al.* 2014: 113). The authors report that throughout his ordeal, Matadi strived to maintain the values that his parents had inculcated in him over the 11 years he spent with them. The authors suggest that he did this by 'displaying *Ubuntu* qualities ... through sharing his transformation process and knowledge' (p. 115) with his fellow former child soldiers. His journey as a peacemaker began incorporating others, moving from himself to intercommunal peacebuilding (Deluca *et al.* 2014: 115). Here, we see an example of peace-making qualities that were inculcated in childhood through parenting, the extended family and the community. The severe disruption in childhood caused by war and the loss of parents did not curtail the childhood peace-making traits. Rather, upon reunification with family, these traits were revived, and to the betterment of the community, particularly former child soldiers.

However, how these peace-making traits are observed, analysed, interpreted, and reported is critical to understanding the peace-making skills of African and Ghanaian children. If these are observed only through the lens of Western methodologies, peace-making skills could be limited to intentionally imparted skills and knowledge. A key reason why narrative on the African child and particularly conflict in Africa is skewed is that stories, data, and analysis are often subjected to methods that are not sensitive to African realities and do not elevate what is valuable in African culture. Methodologies that appreciate the richness of African practices are spiral (Owusu-Ansah & Miji 2013), not linear; they are participatory and collaborative in line with African collectivity and should involve those most affected by the issues—Africans. The ways of knowing and doing peace may not conform entirely to dominant approaches to evidence-building. Therefore, some level of 'Afrocentricity' (Asante 1988) is important in capturing multiple or alternative narratives. There is the need to perceive peace-making and the lives of children, in a region that is deemed conflict-prone—Africa, from the African experience, and narratives should be culturally affirming. Such centralisation demands recognition and respect, not othering, but centering indigenous knowledge (Mkabela 2005). Owusu-Ansah & Miji (2013) posit that to create empowerment, African indigenous knowledge ought to be integral to research and policy making (see also Oduro 2018). Therefore conversations, strategies, research and policies on peace and conflict ought to be driven by African voices and indigenisation of tools and methods that help to surface local interpretation in the analysis of everyday social events in African childhoods.

Misconceptions and challenges to the peace maker role in Ghanaian Children

The peacemaker role of children is not always interpreted positively. In their discussion of children's roles in the family, Rollins *et al.* (1973) allude to the fact that sometimes when children are named the 'peaceful one', they may act to please and become the 'solace of parents'. They may not learn to voice their own frustrations. Ghanaian children are not exempt from these potential challenges. However, within African interconnectedness, peace-making skills empower children to strengthen relationships and so rather than remain 'passive peace-keepers' they engage in *active peace-making,* by taking the initiative to resolve issues directly with peers and siblings or through their guardians such as teachers and parents as seen in the informal conversations with parents.

For some, peace-making is an adult role and children may lose their childhoods if encouraged to play and lead such processes. In Ghana and for that matter Africa, what may be described as a suppression of childhood could well be the child playing their community roles as previously discussed. The separation of childhood and adulthood based on age, then appears artificial and devoid of the African world view (see Clemensen 2016; Abebe & Ofosu-Kusi 2016). These narratives are culture specific and require indigenous lenses. When children understand their socio-cultural context and African values, they understand why they act peacefully for the sustenance of the community they are part of.

Peace-making is sometimes misconceived as a passive endeavour. Drawing the line between being peaceful in everyday life, and not being seen as weak, is important for most parents and their children. Any effort at promoting the child as a peace-maker must ensure that the child maintains self-dignity and respect in accordance with the charters on the rights of children. These elements of respect as previously discussed are well situated in the upbringing of Ghanaian children and are the pillars and outcomes of well-thought out peace-making.

The peace-making roles of Ghanaian children can diminish if the skills and knowledge are not continuously honed. Children need opportunities to practise peace-making. In the anecdotal insights earlier discussed, children resolved conflicts in school spaces with, and without, teachers or parents, and they peer-resolved issues. With the appropriate socio-cultural guidance, teachers and parents can responsibly share the peace-making roles with children and shift from 'teacher-as-judge-and-jury models', where conflict resolution and punishment all reside in the teacher. Experiments in Downtown Alternative School (DAS) in Toronto, Canada, used stories and words to change how children respond to conflict (Fine *et al.* 1995). Based on ground rules developed by children, and with the guidance of teachers, children peace-makers, aged between five and seven, will show up, when other children fight, and ask to

mediate. When both sides accept the offer, the peace-makers will ask each side to tell their side of the issue, while the other side listens. When they have had their turn, the peace-makers will ask both sides for a possible solution. They often found a common ground. The children preferred to resolve the issues with their peers as mediators, rather than with teachers. The teachers reported that children developed language that impacted every aspect of their school lives (See also Morris, Taylor & Wilson 2000). This practice is not alien to Ghanaian children as discussed above. What may be lacking is incorporating such experience into our formalised learning spaces to provide continued learning and practice for children.

This article does not seek to romanticise Ghanaian culture and create an infallible image. Sometimes it is the socio-cultural and political practices that inhibit the peace-making expressions of children. It is common to hear the Akan expression *wo y3 mpanyin s3m* said to a child who tries to mediate or resolve an issue. The expression means the child is acting like an adult or usurping the role of an adult. Some of this name-calling, victimises and disempowers children (see Tetteh & Markwei 2018). Similarly, the saying that 'a child should be seen, not heard', can curtail the peace-making abilities of children. While these practices are often intended to curb excesses in children's behaviours and ensure they act responsibly, without the balance of developing their civic voices, their potential contribution to society is limited.

Sustaining the peace-making traits in Ghanaian children

As Suleiman (2017: 319) emphasises, Ghana's relative peace should not translate into 'social and political complacency.' Ghana's location in a sub-region of political instability, necessitates a deepening of her own internal peace efforts, particularly among young people, building on the soft peace skills found in her socio-cultural context. Aning & Atta-Asamoah (2011: 4–5) have argued that demography and environmental factors critically impact conflicts in West Africa. Citing particularly the 'youth bulge' and economic hardships in the region, they suggest that countries with high populations in the ages of 15–29 are deemed prone to violent conflict. When young people feel left out the decision-making and the distribution of national resources, the proclivity to violent conflict tends to be higher (Aning & Atta-Asamoah 2011: 12–13). This argument is however nuanced when the authors compared the situation to Ghana. They suggest that Ghana's response to its youth bulge has been different; young people have had the opportunity to challenge the status quo (p. 15) in Ghana's development and political processes. These gains potentially achieved through Ghana's socio-cultural and political practices, ought to be sustained strategically given Ghana's geopolitical situation. The early ages of 5–10 years is a good stage to incorporate peace lessons into the development of children. Crawford (2005) explores the importance of peace

studies in the classroom for children in the lower grades using an ecological approach. She suggests a peaceful learning environment and a diversified curriculum (see also Stomfay-Stitz & Wheeler 2003). Although Ghana may not have a standardised programme in the school curriculum that focuses on peace-making skills, cultural studies in the classroom, that intentionally highlight the peace-making elements in Ghanaian culture is a good entry point for training both teachers and pupils. It will help to institutionalise the good practices taken for granted in everyday socialisation. These models[10] could be extended to children and youth in both formal and informal education. More critically, these efforts should be informed by Ghanaian socio-cultural narratives, an approach that will value and incorporate rural schools and communities, and indigenous knowledge. Over time, there could be a large number of people who apply peace-promoting methods in resolving issues.

Organisations that advocate for children's wellbeing in Ghana can shore up the peace-making abilities of children by capturing the socio-cultural contexts. These include international agencies such as UNICEF,[11] UNESCO, international and local NGOs. As the UN Sustainable Development Goals (UN-SDG, 2015) suggests, sustainable programmes are guaranteed by the environments in which they are implemented. A peaceful and just environment (SDG 16), supported by children, and based on core cultural values will help prevent some circumstances that place children in situations of insecurity. Such roles, accorded children, will not only change the narrative of vulnerability, but will empower children to create an intersection between their cultural values gleaned from their upbringing, and the development issues around them. In her recent book, *Frontlines of Peace* (2021), Severine Autesserre highlights the need for local peace processes. This is because locals know the practices that work. Children form part of the 'local eco-system' of peace-making and youth, peace and security policies (United Nations Resolution 2250) underscore the need to include young people in peace work. Implementing these peace protocols through African and Ghanaian socio-cultural lenses can shift narratives about Ghanaian childhoods.

Finally, to change the narrative and advance the peace-making skills of children requires a change in the nature of the politics children see and the governance systems they engage. Hostile partisan politics could diminish their socio-cultural skills for peace-making.

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[10] See also West African Centre for Peace Foundation (https://wacpfgh.org/) in Ghana; Global Campaign for Peace Education (GCPE) https://www.peace-ed-campaign.org; Kettering Foundation, Higher Education Exchanges, (https://www.kettering.org/library/periodicals/higher-education-exchange; KROC Institute for International Peace Studies https://kroc.nd.edu/about-us/what-is-peace-studies/what-is-strategic-peacebuilding/

[11] Such as UNICEF childhood development in Ghana, https://www.unicef.org/ghana/early-childhood-development

Conclusion: towards a new narrative

This article proposes a reach into Ghanaian culture as a way to shore up peace-making roles of children and change the skewed narratives on Ghanaian childhoods. Ghanaian children experience several useful practices that promote peace. These include empathy, dialogue, reconciliatory, and problem-solving skills. These practices are embedded in cultures, metaphors, proverbs, and various traditional practices which children encounter in their upbringing. These traits are however inadequately observed, analysed, and documented, resulting in skewed narratives about African children, often characterised by wars and conflict. These dominant narratives fail to demonstrate the many ways in which Ghanaian children can contribute to peace-making. Unless such potential is studied, nurtured, and utilised in community and nation-building, such valuable skills could be lost. This will further perpetuate the narrow narratives on the Ghanaian child. This article highlights the peace-making potential in Ghanaian children, anchored in their traditions and advocates a strategic national plan to change the parochial narratives on the Ghanaian child. When the multiple dimensions of the experiences of the Ghanaian child is understood, a tapestry of children and their childhood emerges that is as varied as the often-lofty ideas in the global north. This reduces the binaries and notions of 'they and us' (Twum-Danso Imoh, Bourdillon & Meichsner 2019: 2), that mainstream media, academics and Africa's own narratives may have created about children. Given that the peace-making capabilities of children do not feature in the narratives, a thorough study is important not only as an academic exercise but one that can inform peace efforts, an area of priority in Africa.

Although Ghana has not experienced a nationwide protracted conflict, in times of tensions, as often experienced during elections, Ghana, like many African countries comes to the brink of destabilisation. Additionally, as this article has described, Ghana experiences various forms of conflicts, not necessarily violent ones, in everyday lives. Ghanaian children experience everyday disagreements that place them in positions to seek peace. Having been a pace setter in sub-Saharan Africa, Ghana's efforts at changing the narrative around children can significantly influence regional policies and change global narratives on peace and security.

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