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Exploring ambiguous realms: Access, exposure and agency in the interactions of rural Zambian children

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Abstract

In Hang'ombe Village in southern Zambia, the relative lack of physical boundaries between the activities of family members allow children to observe the actions and discussions of adults on close hand, exposing them to the ambiguities of daily life. Children explore these ambiguities in their interactions, testing social roles and conventions. This article explores the vigilance and creative agency displayed by Hang'ombe children, in an environment spurring their acquisition of distinct social and linguistic skills.

Keywords

Access to knowledge, children, cultural learning, linguistic agency, Zambia

Childhood is a stage of discovery, exploring oneself in the particular social, cultural, and physical landscape revealing itself to the young child. As semiotician Gunther Kress (2003) suggests, “[c]hildren come into the world with an absolute interest in meaning,” often leading them to challenge prevailing codes of conduct (p. 154).

In the rural plateaus of southern Zambia, most children spend their days surrounded by family members of varying ages, many homesteads comprising three or more generations and several family units. The intimacy of the homestead and children's participation in basic housekeeping and farming provide them with close exposure to the chores and concerns of older family and community members. Much of this exposure remains implicit, that is, without direct verbal clarification, as children are largely expected to remain attentive and quiet in the company of elders, including their parents. Out of adults' earshot, however, children may be found chattering intensely with their peers, examining and creatively employing the information exposed to them in different arenas of their daily lives (Clemensen, 2011, 2015).

This article explores the social life worlds of a group of 6- to 12-year-old children living in Hang'ombe Village, a rural chiTonga-speaking community of 82 extended households in Zambia's Southern Province. Based on 9 months of linguistic-

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ethnographic fieldwork among Hang'ombe children and their families, including extensive sound recordings conducted by me, my research assistant, and by the children themselves, I investigate the social and linguistic conduct displayed by children in a society enabling them to spend much of their time observing and eavesdropping on older members, as well as in the exclusive company of their siblings, cousins, and friends.

Inspired by current trends in childhood anthropology (Duranti et al., 2012; James and Prout, 1997), I approach children as independent creative actors in search of their own expression and interpretation of the world introduced to them, a search very much informed by *language*. Although children in Hang'ombe spend relatively much of their time unattended by adults, receiving little systematic assessment or verbal stimulation, they are prone to develop distinct interactional skills, scrutinizing and creatively employing both the explicit and the implicit information available to them.

Cultural paths of learning and participation

Childhood studies have assumed an increasingly global orientation in the past two decades, displaying a broad cultural and demographic diversity in the core elements of children's lives (Qvortrup et al., 2009). Common to these studies is an interest in the interplay between structure and agency, that is, the relationship between the physical, cultural, and socioeconomic environment in which a child grows up, and the social conduct displayed by her or him within that particular environment.

Salient in this tradition is the work of social psychologist Barbara Rogoff, juxtaposing childhood studies in multiple settings across the world (Rogoff, 2003; Rogoff et al., 2003, 2015). Rogoff is especially interested in the cultural premises for children's social development and participation in the surrounding environment, manifested in prevailing ideas about learning, childrearing, social relations, autonomy, and so on. Comparing different traditions of organizing children's learning and participation in key cultural activities, Rogoff et al. (2015) differ between three prototypical learning models: *assembly-line instruction*, *guided repetition*, and *intent community participation*. These models co-exist in societies across the world, but to different extents and with different priorities in accordance with the specific cultural and socioeconomic premises.

The first two models are based on experts' formalized instruction of novices, although with different degrees of formalization. Assembly-line instruction entails the "transmission" of information from experts, in specialized exercises outside the context of productive, purposive activity" (Rogoff et al., 2015: 481). Implying the creative agency of each individual child, this model prevails in most schools and middle-class homes across the world today (Rogoff et al., 2015). Guided repetition, on the other hand, regards the systematic exchange of memorization drills between experts and novices. Pejoratively named "rote learning," this practice has been broadly dismissed by educators and scholars, associating it with the passive student role and the rigid discipline of 19th and early 20th century schools (Rogoff et al., 2015: 484). However, the use of guided repetition remains in both religious and secular settings in communities across the majority world, providing a familiar framework for children's acquisition of significant cultural knowledge (Rogoff et al., 2015).

The third model, intent community participation, entails acquisition within the work environment of adult family and community members, enabling children and other

novices to learn “by actively observing and ‘listening-in’ during ongoing community activities and contributing when ready” (Rogoff et al., [2015: 479](#)). Rogoff et al. (2003) describe this model as a result of the close co-existence of children and adults in certain societies:

In communities in which young children are involved in the mature activities of their family and community, it maybe superfluous for adults to organize lessons and specialized conversations to prepare young children with the skills of schooling, to prepare them for the “real” world. Instead of doing exercises out of the context of the productive use of skills and information, young children’s integration in family and community activities allows them to become increasingly deeply involved through their intent participation. (p. 183)

As I elaborate below, this includes many rural communities in sub-Saharan Africa today, influencing the particular skills and learning paths displayed by many African children (Nsamenang, 2008; Spittler and Bourdillon, 2012). Each of the models above provides children with different kinds of access and exposure to the realm of adult life. My thesis is that such exposure has distinct significance for the communicative practice and agency developed by children living in different settings.

Access and exposure in children’s lives

This study was conducted during 9 months in the village of Hang’ombe in Zambia’s southern province in 2008–2009 and again during brief follow-up visits in 2010, 2013, and 2014 (Clemensen, 2010, 2011, 2015). Inspired by the linguistic-anthropological paradigm of *language socialization studies* (Duranti et al., 2012), I combine close analysis of everyday interactions among children, observed during extensive ethnographic fieldwork among a select number of families, with analysis of broader structural patterns in the children’s socialization to and participation in a society undergoing concurrent processes of social reproduction and change. **[AQ11]** With the permission of parents, children, and the Zambian Ministry of Education, I followed and observed a socioeconomically diverse group of 19 Hang’ombe children between the ages of 6 and 12 years, as they moved repeatedly between the arenas central to their daily lives: the homestead, the bush, the garden, the marketplace, the church, and the school.

As part of my observations, I produced around 100 digital sound recordings—each with a duration of 1–2 hours—of interactions occurring among the children in these different arenas, mostly while walking or performing different chores. In addition, about 90 hours of recordings were made by some of the children themselves, having consented to carry the recorder while walking, playing, working, or relaxing with their siblings and peers within the context of the household and surrounding fields. All of these recordings were then transcribed, translated, anonymized, and analyzed in close collaboration with my Zambian sociolinguist research assistant.

Children in Hang’ombe Village are central partakers in their family economies, mostly relying on cattle and sustenance farming. Accompanying and gradually assisting their older relatives in housekeeping and farming, they are acquainted with family chores and responsibilities from an early age. This entails both certain restrictions and liberties, requiring children to work long hours, often in hard physical labor, while allowing them the command of younger siblings and a relative freedom of movement. Girls are mostly tied to the homestead area, while boys are given more leash, herding cattle in the bush with their brothers and friends. But siblings and peers

of both genders also spend much of their time together unattended by adults, accompanying each other in the homes, gardens, maize fields, and on the way to school, witnessing each other's experiences and transformations to a degree often surpassing that of parents and other adults. Activities of work and play are mostly intertwined; children's role play tends to recall the roles, chores, and commentary of working adults, and toddlers can be observed mimicking the gestures of women peeling vegetables or men ploughing the fields. Rather than mere imitations of adults, however, I interpret such activities as children's active attempts to explore the social efficacy of particular kinds of physical, social, and linguistic conduct and—drawing on these insights—to interact with the world around them and position themselves favorably in that world. In line with the overall scope of this special *Childhood* issue, I thus perceive the children as potential *agents of social change*, actively employing the information and conditions presented to them in creative ways.

A core part of Hang'ombe children's basic socialization occurs through what Rogoff et al. call *intent community participation*, observing, imitating, and gradually assisting their older relatives and peers in the household chores. This affects children's degree of access and exposure to the daily life of adult family and community members. Although expected to remain quiet in the company of adults, particularly when these are engaged in work or "serious talk," children generally have access to the same arenas as adults, giving them versatile exposure to different kinds of social information. It allows children to observe and eavesdrop on discussions among older members, exposing them to the joys, concerns, privileges, and dilemmas of adult life. This includes prevailing activities of adults spending time in the local township, flirting, drinking, cursing, and listening to loud music. Most children in Hang'ombe thus acquire a rich and somewhat ambiguous impression of what it entails to live and act as a grown person in contemporary society, an impression that may be understood in a larger regional and historical perspective which I elaborate below.

Ambiguities of becoming

In his book, *Expectations of modernity. Myths and meanings of urban life on the Zambian Copperbelt*, anthropologist James Ferguson explores the sociocultural and psychological repercussions of the radical societal changes marking Zambia's more recent history (Ferguson, 1999). Through the narrated life experiences of mine workers in the Zambian Copperbelt, he unfolds the post-independent euphoria and rapid infrastructural development of the late 1960s, the steep economic decline and despair following the global copper crisis in the mid-1970s, and the subsequent decades of struggle among large parts of the population to recreate not only a physical livelihood but also a revised sense of self. From modern cosmopolitans and world citizens, many Zambians now had to adopt a more humble self-image and existence, often involving the reestablishment of strained kinship relations and responsibilities (Ferguson, 1999: 123ff).

Although Zambia's economic situation has gradually changed since, it can be argued that the *crisis of meaning* called out by Ferguson and others (Crehan, 1997; Ferguson, 1999: 14; Moore and Vaughan, 1994) has endured in today's climate of global neoliberalism, visible, for example, in the high unemployment rate prevailing especially in Zambia's urban areas (World Bank, 2013) and the increasing hardships among young men both in rural and urban areas to provide for a wife and children, let alone their aging parents (Cliggett, 2005). In a study on relations between urban space, socioeconomic

mobility, and gender in the lives of young people in Lusaka, anthropologist Karen Tranberg Hansen suggests that many young Zambians—especially men—now struggle to attain the economic status and independency necessary for them to be recognized as adults, not only by older generations but also among themselves (Hansen, 2005). Confronted with alluring global media discourses of their “potential as the leaders of tomorrow” (Hansen, 2005: 13), as well as with the local realities of global neoliberalism, that is, increased social and economic uncertainty, inequality, and exclusion (Hansen, 2005: 4), the young people in Hansen’s study express the literal and metaphorical challenge of being “stuck in the compound,” unable to transcend the social and economic constraints associated with being young and poor.

Although Ferguson and Hansen’s studies were both conducted in urban areas in the 1990s, the crisis of meaning they address also concern the generations of Zambians currently living in rural communities like Hang’ombe. In spite of differences in their family composition and religious affiliation, level of formal education, and size of livestock and land, the youngsters and adults I came to know there all conveyed a fundamental experience of uncertainty, not just physically and financially—southern Zambia has been struck by cattle disease and severe drought in the past decade, affecting livestock and maize, two dominant sources of food and income in the region—but also an experience of *social* uncertainty, resembling the crisis of meaning called out by scholars like Ferguson and Hansen above. Among Hang’ombe members, this experience is linked to gradual local changes, like increased theft, violence, and alcoholism; difficulties in raising children and youngsters as respectable self-reliant family and community members; and a disbelief in the moral capacities of schooling, accompanied by a weakening of kinship ties and obligations. These experiences correlate with my own observations in Hang’ombe and the neighboring township Bwasanu which contains the local school along with the marketplace and a number of small shops and taverns.

As indicated above, some of this ambiguity concerns the institution of school. Since the introduction of free basic education in 1996, national enrollment numbers have increased quite drastically (UNESCO, 2012), also in Hang’ombe where the large majority of children now attend grades 1–7 in the local basic school, while about 45%—out of which two-thirds are boys—complete grade 9 (my census 2009). As in many parts of the world, Hang’ombe members tend to associate schooling with concepts of modernity, status, and promises of a better, more secure life, and formally educated people are perceived as both intellectually and morally superior. However, as I have argued elsewhere (Clemensen, 2015), schooling is also subject to much skepticism and debate among parents and elders, questioning its ability to qualify children for paid employment, let alone preparing them for a life as self-reliant, respectable community members. Perhaps adopting such skepticism, Hang’ombe children appear to favor the immediate symbolic “market value” of schooling—employing an academic register in everyday talk, wearing uniforms to the garden—compared to its potential, rather unreliable long-term pay-off in the shape of further education, formal employment, and economic wealth. Even among 10- to 12-year-old Hang’ombe children, schoolwork thus tends to occupy only a fragment of their days compared to the time and energy spent on farming and household work (Clemensen, 2015).

This ambiguous role of schooling correlates with a number of qualitative studies conducted both in Zambia and other sub-Saharan African countries, addressing the school’s radical ideological impact on basic concepts, for example, of knowledge,

learning, kinship, reciprocity, individuality, gender, and sexuality in local communities, often leaving parents and elders feeling unable to understand or guide children and youngsters toward their notions of a secure adult existence (Boesen, 2000; Meinert, 2009; Serpell, 1993). This experience is often particularly pronounced around concepts of *gender*, with modern schools encouraging both male and female students to postpone childbirth and marriage and to focus on their studies rather than their household chores (Johnson-Hanks, 2006; Stambach, 2000). Although most adults in Hang'ombe support the schooling of their daughters, nieces, and granddaughters, many criticize local teachers for instilling them with unrealistic and immoral ideas of a modern, independent life in the city, far away from the day-to-day obligations of village life. Concurrent with the spread of modern schooling, the traditional girls' maturation ritual *nkolola* has lost ground all over Zambia's southern province (Kennedy, 2013), and although varying programs of moral and religious education have since been implemented in the national curriculum, along with youth programs in local churches, both the schoolteachers and church elders I talked to shared parents' concern with the social and structural challenges faced by young Zambians today.

Many parents seek to reduce such ambiguity by pointing their children toward traditional, relatively unequivocal social ideals through verbal rebukes and adjustments as well as more implicit household activities of intent community participation. Central among these ideals are "listening" or *kunvwa*, associated with qualities of attention, obedience, diligence, and a sense of social responsibility—and "intelligence" or *maano*, involving wisdom, self-reliance, and perseverance. Both *kunvwa* and *maano* concur with what psychologists and anthropologists refer to as the *socioaffective competence*—an ability to adapt and interrelate with other people promoted in rural communities across large parts of Africa (e.g. Serpell, 1993, 1996; Super and Harkness, 2008). **[AQ2]**

Exposed to the same ambiguities and uncertainties of modern society as their parents and older relatives, however, children produce their own understandings of the world around them. Observing prevailing conditions and conventions, along with the social "cracks" and possibilities contained in these, they find creative ways of manifesting themselves in daily life. In Hang'ombe, this tendency is particularly pronounced in children's interactions with their siblings and peers while playing, working, or relaxing in the absence of adults in different arenas of daily life. Although older children tend to imitate the roles and attitudes of parents toward their younger siblings and peers, younger children seem aware that this position may be challenged if one is clever or persistent enough. In the following analyses, I explore the creative agency displayed by Hang'ombe children in their everyday interactions with peers, revealing both reproduction and redefinition of prevailing concepts, practices, roles, and hierarchies in surrounding society.

Interpreting sensitive information

On an early February morning, 10-year-old Malilwe and her two cousins, 10-year-old Mududu and 9-year-old Brenda, are walking from their mutual homestead toward the garden about 3 km away to assist their aunt and mother Love in the weeding of vegetables. Malilwe has been staying with Love and her extended family for about a month, as her own mother—Love's sister—has remarried and moved to a village far from Hang'ombe. The three girls are walking on their own, Mududu holding the recorder. As they walk, they share their impressions of an argument occurring the previous night

between Love's 21-year-old son Obrian and his wife, bina Junior, who share a separate house in the girls' homestead together with their 13-month-old son Junior:

1. Malilwe: Jilo ba uncle bakabatanda bina Junior, bakalwana badaala. Nkiinga Junior kulila. Mane beenda amasiku. Ndakanvwa buyo bantu bapanga coongo ani balalwana. Ba uncle bakali koledwe. Yesterday uncle [Obrian] chased mother of Junior, they were fighting. Junior cried. She went away in the night. I heard the noise from the people. I did not know they were fighting. My uncle was drunk.
2. Brenda: Kayi bina Junior bakatukana ba uncle nibakasika balikoledwe. Mother of Junior insulted uncle who was drunk.
3. Mududu: Nkaambo bamulamu balatukana, mane balaamba ati "omubwa." Nkujana baama banyamuka bainka. My sister-in-law insults [a lot], she said "you dog." My mother stood up and went [to where they were fighting].
4. Brenda: Ino bakalila bina Junior. Mother of Junior cried.
5. Malilwe: Bakamutola amwana [sena]? Did she go with the child [Junior]?
6. Mududu: Mwana wacaala a Mwiinga. Mbuli kuti ba Obrian bafwumina kwa Nebon ancinga. The child remained with Mwiinga. It seems Obrian has gone to Nebon's home on a bicycle.

[After this, the girls remain quiet for a while, where after they begin to discuss other topics.]

This brief interaction illustrates how the physical closeness of extended family habitation may expose children to intimate aspects of daily life, often containing delicate social information unsuited for open inquiry—and how children use their peers to process such information and create meaningful interpretations for themselves. The three girls all seem to have captured parts of the argument and the subsequent parting of bina Junior to her father Nebon's homestead a few kilometers away, leaving her baby Junior behind with the girls' older sister/cousin, 15-year-old Mwiinga. This event contains deep potential insights for the girls on prevailing norms of gender, marriage, and kinship, familiarizing them, for example, with the social repercussions of alcohol abuse affecting many local families and the basic vulnerability of especially young women in marital conflict, often compelling them to leave the household of their husband and his extended family, seeking refuge with their own parents while leaving their children behind. From the extract above, we cannot derive the full extent of the girls' experience of these issues, or how they position themselves toward them—but their interest and attention to the more tacit social information exposed to them are obvious. In the interaction below, we see how children may interact more directly with such information, exploring, testing, and challenging prevailing roles and norms.

Exploring gendered stereotypes

On an afternoon in May during the month-long school break marking the final part of the harvesting season, 8-year-old Flora and her 6-year-old cousin Senefa are playing in

their mutual *play field* (*cibuwa cakusobanina*), a small piece of dried-up land designated by families for the play and early farming practice of young children. The girls have been busy helping Flora's mother with the peeling of maize and have now been dismissed for the afternoon, on condition that they take along Senefa's baby sister, 9-month-old Vera, now hanging on Senefa's back. Although the soil is arid and has not produced crops for long, the girls are eagerly hacking with small sticks in the ground, pretending to be searching for and digging up sweet potatoes, just as they have seen their mothers and older siblings do many times in the fields around them. After a while, Flora's 3-year-old brother Nelson joins in, grapping a stick and trying to keep up with the girls' conversation, which has now moved on to other aspects of farming, like the risk of enraging dangerous insects if hitting a wrong spot with one's hoe, and the general hardships of manual labor. Gradually, without any explicit coordination, the children's conversation evolves into a kind of family role play, with Flora taking the self-designated role of the mother, and Senefa and Nelson acting as her children. Flora acts rather bossily, ordering her peers to "dig harder into the ground" (*kusyisya*) and warning Senefa against "dropping the child" (*kuunsya mwana*), still sitting on her back. At one point, when Nelson has drifted off to dig by himself, Flora evokes the issue of "boyfriends" (*basankwa*), half-jokingly accusing Senefa of "moving with boys" (*kweenda aankako*), that is, secretly experimenting with sex and romance:

1. Flora [to Senefa, sternly]: Mamii mo!
Hey, Mama!
2. Senefa: Hee?
What?
3. Flora [in low voice]: Ntwaanzi tusankwa ntomweeteeta?
What do you do with the boys you bring?
4. Senefa [hesitant]: Kwiina ...
Nothing ...
5. Flora [in low voice]: Mbuyanga mani. "Kwiina" kuli? ...
Ndiyookuuma kuti nkakujane aaka
sankwa ... Nkaakaya kana Sinambili.
Mwaali kweenda aankako.
You fool. "Nothing," you say? ... I will
beat you if i find you with that boy. It is
that boy from Sinambili [Village]. You
were moving with him.
6. Senefa [insecure]: Peepe. Naamulayanda mumubuzye
Nelson. Nseendi aanguwe.
No. If you want, you can ask Nelson. I
don't go out with him.
7. Flora [sternly]: Zyakuubiila yana kumulu ccindi
mubuzyizye nzi! ... Koti ndilamubuzye
asika.
I will beat you, you are lying! ... I will ask
him when he comes back.
8. Senefa [hesitant]: Niini oyo ... niini oyo ...
This one ... this one ... [trying to
remember a boy's name]

9. Flora: Borne? [the name of a boy who recently visited from another village].
Borne?
10. Senefa [low voice]: Borne. Wainkide kokuya.
Borne. He went [back] there [to his village].
11. Flora: Ndamubuzya buya. Kuti “Weenda aani? Weenda aani?” Ndamubuzya kuti “Weendaani?” Ndamubuzya.
Beenzyinyoko balandaambila kuti inga ulilide kucikolo nainga mali. Waajana kuli?
I will ask him [Nelson]. I’ll say, “Who does she move with? Who does she move with?” I’ll ask him “Who does she move with?” I will ask him. Your friends tell me that you eat a lot at school. Where do you get the money?
- [Senefa does not respond. Flora turns towards to Nelson, who is playing on the grass nearby.]
12. Flora: Nelson!
Nelson!
13. Nelson: Hee?
What?
14. Flora: Oyu weendaani oyu?
Who does this one [Senefa] move with?
15. Nelson: Hee?
What?
16. Flora: Oyu, Mama. Wendaani? Musankwa wakwe? Huh?
This one, Mama. Who does she move with? Who is her boyfriend? Huh?
17. Nelson [low voice]: Ccita.
I don’t know.
18. Flora [to Nelson]: Akaya ndakabona kaya!
I saw her and you with that boy!
19. Flora [to Senefa, sternly]: Mwakali kweenda eliya buzuba ankako.
Ati naa, nda ... ati ati ... ati ncomunga, ati ncomunga, ati ncomunga nywe mulakaka-kaka kakwiita kasankwa ... ati tamukaki, umwi one day kazyoomutolela limwi. Nciindi cenu we kamweebelezya.
You were moving [with him] that day. This manner ... I ... this this ... this manner in which ... this manner in which you don’t say no to calls from boys ... this ...

one day he will take you [with him]. That is your own fault.

[The girls remain quiet for a while after this, still working in the play field.]

Like in the previous interaction, the children above explore issues of social delicacy, this time in the shape of a vivid role play. Among Hang'ombe families, I frequently overheard mothers scolding their teenage daughters in a tone and rhetoric similar to the one adopted by 8-year-old Flora, using subtle metaphors for sexual conduct like “bringing boys” (3), “moving with boys” (5), “eating a lot” (11)—that is, receiving food, money, and other gifts from alleged lovers—and “not saying no to calls from boys” (19). Apart from her advanced skills of observing and imitating people around her, Flora's acting reveals an ability to mock and implicitly challenge the authoritative conduct of older members, in this case by exaggerating the mother's voice, gestures, and accusations against her terrified daughter. By doing so, Flora may be said to reproduce a widespread negative stereotype in the region of young girls and women as promiscuous, irresponsible, and “weak”—but rather than as a mere reproduction, I see her acting as a critical exploration of the moral assumptions embedded in such stereotypes.

Senefa seems less comfortable than Flora with the role she has been assigned, responding hesitantly to her “mother's” threats and accusations whose implicit meaning she may not understand to the same extent as her older cousin. **AO3** Still, Senefa tries to defend herself, denying the charges (4), aligning herself with young Nelson (6), and suggesting that a boy named Borne, who recently visited the girls' homestead from a neighboring village, has now “gone back there” (10). In her young age, 6-year-old Senefa thus already shows some awareness of the moral codices commonly ascribed to young women in the region of virtuousness, chastity, and obedience—codices which she complies with and thus reproduces above.

The excerpt above may be read as simultaneously challenging and reproducing prevailing norms and stereotypes of gender, age, and authority. In like with language socialization studies of children's use of *revoicing* and *mock insults* in their interactions with peers (e.g. Cekaite and Aronsson, 2004; Poveda and Marcos, 2005), my overall thesis is that children—like adults—generally seek to understand and appropriate existing power structures, mostly utilizing these structures whenever they sustain his or her position favorably in particular situations, but also actively challenging and disassociating themselves from such power structures whenever they appear less favorable to the individual child. Flora thus utilizes her position as the oldest child in the group above to assert authority toward the two others while at the same time challenging the authority generally ascribed to parents and older members by secretly mocking them, thus creating a brief social leeway for herself. The wider effect of such instances of opposition against existing power structures may be limited, and as they grow into young women, children like Flora and Senefa are likely to be increasingly subjugated to existing norms of gender, age, and kinship relations. However, I approach these subtle instances of opposition against existing power structures, like Flora's mocking impersonation above, as implications of a more gradual and extensive social awareness and change occurring among young children. This also goes for the following recording excerpt of another young girl in Hang'ombe, playfully mocking the dramatic speech of local preachers.

Practicing moral authority

Representatives of the local Seventh Day Adventist church generally enjoy a high status in Hang'ombe, respected and feared for their status and access to powerful knowledge. Attending the weekly church service with their families or listening to adult members' devout Biblical references and hymn singing at home, children frequently experience the power of religious discourse in daily community life. I often heard children using expressions like "you people of God" (*bamwami ulamuuma*) when rebuking toddlers, and on several occasions I observed children—both boys and girls—mocking the thundering rebukes of an angry preacher in front of their peers, imitating the fierce voice and dramatic gestures often applied at church.

One example of this appears in the extract below where 8-year-old Lushomo is sitting with her 6-month-old sister Lweendo on a mat on the floor in the *cikuta* or visitors' hall in the homestead of her own extended family. Her mother and older sisters are preparing supper in the kitchen hall about 20 m away, and she has accepted my placement of the digital recorder next to her—but apart from that, Lushomo seems to be joking and performing mainly for the sake of her own entertainment. As the extract below begins, she is trying to give Lweendo a lukewarm cup of tea, playfully rebuking her for pushing the tea away:

1. Lushomo: Yoonse eyi njootila yalinji awa njootila. Nkooko. Nceeci cikapu we nauyanda kuti ndicite buti nsyii! ... Nsyi, nsyi, nsyi, hehehe! [laughing demonstratively]. Ci tea camana, yawe cana. Mboopya utalike kulila ... Kutegwa upye? There is no more [tea], look. Take it [the cup]. You have poured down a lot of tea, that's okay! ... Take it, take it, take it, hehehe! [laughing demonstratively]. The tea has finished, you bad baby. She has burnt herself ... You start crying now?
2. [sternly] Yebo. Mpotikkale awa utete tubone utete unywaame. Unywaame. Mpoyanda kulala awa abbuda. Walitesya caali. You. This is where you will have to sit [on the wet mat], I want you to get soaked. You get soaked. We shall sit on this wet mat. You made it wet on purpose.
- [Lushomo whisks away the flies that have been attracted by the spilled tea]
3. [screaming] Nzinini azyalo zyatalika! The flies have come!
4. [screaming] He! Hey! Hey! Hey! What about this? Huh? Hi! Hey! Hey! Hey! What about this? Huh?
- [Mimicking English-like sounds in dramatic tone]
5. [loudly] Hamashmlamshla mshla brrrrrrlllsbrrrr hahe! Una! Together! From here. In one poem I take all the people had ... had minee! Hamashmlamshla mshla brrrrrrlllsbrrrr hahe! Oops! Together! From here. In one poem I take all the people had ... had mine!

6. [“preaching”] Bomboyamba? Caamba kuti, “kokkalikila mwana yebo!” Ulyanzi kale? Matwi ayo. Kunoopailila. Zikinya matwi. Azyoomugali-gali. Azyoomugali-gali mutwe so. Kuzyoo mujwa! Kumujwa nyemu mumutwe. Ulanditonka. Unditonkelanzi?
Are you listening? That means, “behave, you baby!” Are you eating again? I will pray for you. I will shake your ears. Shaking the ears, shaking the ears like this. Pulling them out. You are pushing me! Why are you pushing me?
- [Lushomo gently pulls Lweendo’s ears, then lets her go as she starts singing]
7. [singing] Pele bulowa bwa Jeesu.
Only the blood of Jesus.
8. [“preaching”] Zyimane zyibi zyako zyili mumutwe omo. Zyimane zyoonse tukupailile. Yebo mwana yebo. Nzinini zyandisyupa! So, musaangune kundipailila, mebo. Mutaangune yooyu uugalangene, uusyupide kulila koonse-koonse-koonse.
All the sins in your head shall finish. All the sins in you will finish when we pray for you. The flies are annoying me, so you should pray for me! But first, pray for this one [Lweendo] who is ugly and crying-crying-crying.
9. [screaming, in English] And my skirt!!! Huh! Has a people if he can’t me!!
... Has a people, people to- gether! I want to gather my meee ...
And my skirt!!! Huh! Has a people if he can’t me!!
... Has a people, people together! I want to gather my meee ...
10. [singing] “My talk to meee, my follow people, my churchie, my daddyni, my follow people ...” Huti meeeeee!
Huti can’t me ... by talking! For the poem! For the poem titled “Tola, mutolo, mutolo tayeledede kulya pe.”
“My talk to meee, my follow people, my churchie, my daddyni, my follow people ...” Huti meeeeee!
Huti can’t me ... by talking! For the poem! For the poem titled “Lazy, a lazy, lazy person should not eat.”
11. [yelling] Yebo! Nhi! nhi! nhi! Mutolo, oyu mwana mutolo, mutolo oyu mwana tuyanda kuti abe muyumu. Abe muyumu tumukambaukile, tubaite bapasita bamuka. Yebo, yebo, yebo, yebo.
You! My, my, my, my! This baby is lazy. This baby is lazy, now we want her to be strong. She should be strong so we shall preach to her. We shall call the pastor to preach for her. You, you, you.
- [Lushomo continues like this for several minutes.]

In this situation, 8-year old Lushomo employs a number of performative features characteristic of sermons in the local Adventist church, especially identifiable in her use of an oratorical voice, shifting between whispering, chanting, screaming, and singing. She also evokes several linguistic features common to preachers, code-switching back and forth between English and chiTonga (10, 12), using rhetorical questions like “Are you listening?” (6), desires of wanting “to pray for this one who is ugly and crying” (8), and other religious expressions, like “the blood of Jesus” (7) “finishing the sins in your head” (8), “a people together!” (9), and “my follow people” (10), both in chiTonga and in English. As a second grader, Lushomo has only recently been introduced to English at school, and she does not master more than a few English phrases and fixed expressions. This is visible, for example, in her gibberish expressions, like “In one poem I take all the people had ... had minee!” (5), and “Has a people if he can’t me!” (9), uttered in a dramatic voice. But in spite of her limited proficiency, Lushomo has clearly realized the performative value of the English language in a community associating it with the school, the clinic, the city, and the West (Spitulnik, 1998). Adopting an advanced register commonly associated with preachers, including a solemn voice, dramatic gestures, and rhetorical rebukes against little Lweendo, Lushomo turns the discourse of a formal, authoritative figure like the preacher into a quite impressive but also ridiculing performance.

Like Flora above, Lushomo thus manages to both reproduce and challenge a familiar authoritative figure outside the premises in which such authority is usually applied. She combines her preacher-like character with the role of an angry parent, scolding her baby sister for spilling tea all over the floor (1). This parent is subject to an equal dramatization, using sarcasm like “You start crying now?” (1), pejoratives like “bad child” (1) “ugly” (8), and “lazy” (11), and threats like “I want you to get soaked” and “we shall sit on this wet mat” (2). In line with the previous interactions, I perceive Lushomo’s performance as a simultaneous attempt to explore and position herself toward a particular social order prevailing around her. Exhibiting the contradictory nature of the authoritative discourse employed by adult figures around her, she manages to assert herself as an alert, competent, and self-assured child.

Conclusion

Irrespective of under what circumstances children grow up, and how parents, teachers, or other actors may try to shield them from “the real world,” for example, by placing them in specialized institutions or cushy nurseries, all children experience some degree of the basic complexities, challenges, and ambiguities of adult existence as an integral part of childhood. As I have illustrated in this article, the physical and sociocultural structure of a close-knit rural African society like Hang’ombe Village and the involvement of children in practically all aspects of daily household and community life from an early age give them a wide-ranging exposure to the life worlds of different people around them, including parents, siblings, grandparents, and extended family members working, chatting, fighting, or relaxing at home, neighbors passing by, and fellow community members spending time in the township. This exposure may provide young children with advanced insights into practices, codices, and conditions that do not directly concern the children themselves, like the repercussions of marital conflict, the negotiation of sexual conduct between mothers and teenage daughters, and the contradictions of religious doctrine conveyed by church elders or stern parents. As I have shown, these insights may

often be shaped in distinct linguistic and performative formats which are shared, explored, and often contested in children's mutual interactions.

In a society marked by profound uncertainty in terms of health, education, employment, and young people's prospects for a safe and meaningful existence, children's ability to process and creatively employ complex social information may be crucial to their social and physical survival. Rather than blindly reproducing the roles and power structures presented to them, they may utilize these roles and structures to their own advantage, thus acting as small-scale agents of social change. Obviously, the scope of children's social rebellion may be limited in a patriarchal, age-hierarchical, and highly interdependent society, and many if not most children may eventually conform to prevailing conditions and conventions around them, if not voluntarily then by the pressure of outer constraints.

Interdisciplinary studies like the present, combining language socialization studies of children's daily interactions with cultural psychology on children's learning and development under particular historical, political, and socioeconomic conditions, may contribute to the growing literature of childhood studies reflecting an increasingly global orientation (Qvortrup et al., 2009). Based on extensive ethnographic research, observing the perspectives of children as well as those of various significant actors and institutions around them, such studies may strengthen the focus on interplays between structure and agency in children's lives and realities already distinguishing the field.

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