THE ROOT Media coverage of African crises and wars like the Biafran War of and the Ethiopian famine created views about the child

How to liberate the African child from generational flaws

Today being the International Day of the African Child, our international correspondent, *Shimbo Pastory* held an interview with *Dr Sacha Hepburn*, a historian of modern Africa at Birkbeck, University of London to tackle issues related to the welfare of the African child.

Question: Dr Sacha, an African Child is a generational and 'natural' icon of a lost hope, low class, primitiveness, and diminished race. How did the world come to have this conception?

Answer: Historians of childhood and youth have demonstrated that neither concept is universal and should instead be understood as historically and culturally constructed, and spatially and temporally specific. Dominant representations and understandings of African childhood and youth in the world today (and particularly in Western societies) focus on poverty, malnutrition, exploitation, and lack of access to education and rights.

These current representation and understandings can be traced back to the racialised constructions of childhood and youth that developed during the period of European colonisation of Africa. For example, in the British Empire, class-based and gendered constructions of childhood were exported from Britain to the colonies, where they were reworked to suit the racial hierarchies which structured colonial societies.

These ideas intersected with understandings of chronological age: specific chronological ages were attributed to persons of different life phases, and age-based understandings of maturity contributed to the definition and demarcation of childhood in colonial legal systems. Combined, these processes resulted in different understandings of age for white and non-white children. In British colonial Africa, colonists constructed white childhood as a time for education and protection, and black childhood as a period of labour, as part of efforts to prepare children for their racialised and unequal future roles in colonies.

How did such representation of the African Child win prominence in the global media?

During the later twentieth century, children were commonly depicted in media coverage of African crises and wars such as the Biafran War of 1967-1970 and the 1983-1985 Ethiopian famine. The images in such coverage showed children living in terrible circumstances and in fear for their lives. Such coverage aimed to raise awareness of these disasters and of human rights abuses, but it also contributed to longer standing ideas about African childhood as a period of crisis and hopelessness. These ideas continue to shape reporting on African childhood and youth in the media today.

A child is ideally identified as a protected/covered member of a family unit, why was it not similar with the historical African Child?

Current representation and understandings of African childhood and youth result also from the history and contemporary workings of humanitarianism and development. Abosede George argues that the concept of 'the African child' emerged during the interwar period, with children increasingly seen as individuals rather than as members of family units by international humanitarian actors, liberal colonial officials and elite Africans. From this point onwards there were increased efforts by government officials, social workers, and charities to intervene in African children's lives and reshape parenting, education and childhood.

While it is important to draw attention to the challenges facing many children in Africa today, the most extreme challenges of war, famine and catastrophe do not define childhood for the majority of children on the continent. The majority of children still face challenges, however, particularly surrounding parental poverty and limited access to education beyond the primary level.

Evidently, Africa, and particularly sub-Saharan Africa, suffers a problem of historical systemic malfunction. From a scholarly perspective, are governments trying their best to create promising conditions for the African child?

Governments across the continent have pursued and continue to pursue initiatives to improve the conditions facing children and youth in their countries. These include efforts to expand access to education and to abolish the most harmful forms of child labour. Governments have often done this work in partnership with intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations, such as the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and other UN agencies.

But there is much more that governments could do to improve the conditions of children. These include adopting more extensive legislation to regulate children's employment and prevent child labour, and better supporting female children and youth to complete their primary and secondary education.

In Tanzania specifically, there are a number of challenges. There is evidence of Tanzanian children engaging in the worst forms of child labour including in mining and domestic service. Pregnant students are also commonly expelled from schools on the mainland, a practice which limits girls' access to education and makes them vulnerable to child labour. The government must support efforts to prevent discrimination of pregnant students, strengthen legislation to prevent the worst forms of child labour, and improve its capacity to inspect workplaces and punish employers who exploit children.

Conclusion

African Children cannot flee the effects and conditioning of surroundings, culture, and normative practices, unless the conditioners are modified for good. Child labour, denial of education, denial of rights, gender discrimination, among others, stand out among in many African societies. A lot of advocacy is taking place, yet more is needed. Liberation of the African Child calls for a liberation of the worldview of the entire African society whereby the child will be given priority.

Images of some African children. The way outsiders view the African Child contains what has come to be known as generational flaws. These flaws need to be corrected for the African Child to be viewed in the right way. PHOTO | COURTESY