‘Did the constitution produce my children!?’ Negotiating Ugandan childhood and nationhood through performance

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At a musical performance at the National Theatre in Kampala, Uganda, the stage is packed with fifty colorfully-adorned musicians and choir members, led by a charismatic female soloist in a gomesi, the Ugandan national dress. She moves throughout the group of attentive choir members who sit about her, swaying to the music as she harmoniously describes the basic provisions of the country’s new constitution in Luganda:

I want to consider the issues about children in the constitution because they are the foundation of the country’s development.
When you give birth to a child, don’t strangle it to death.
Those are the country’s gifts.
A child deserves to get proper care, health and feeding so as to live a good life.

The choir repeats each of her lines for emphasis and effect as a steady rhythm is pounded out on the drums. The choir divides into three groups to sing overlapping rounds of phrases in harmony:

Choir 2: Some of you say, ‘I’m not your parent. Why should I care?’
Pity for your unkindness!
Every citizen, please, you have a responsibility to raise the children into responsible people.
Choir 3: We also see clearly that it is very right to use this constitution to help us.
These people with the hope of leading us astray, please leave us alone.
We discovered the path to our growth.

At the end of the song, the choir comes back together, the drums quicken, and dancers move jubilantly to the front of the stage, shaking their skirted hips and smiling widely. The choir claps in support as they hoist a giant constitution up and punch the air in triumph. The crowd explodes with applause. The choir members bow and exit the stage. The topic of their song has particular resonance for them: they are all primary school students under 12 years old.
In many countries, childhood acts as a crucial site for the maintenance of nationalism. People talk of bequeathing the nation to their children; they use metaphors of inheritance to argue for everything from environmental and cultural conservation to radical economic change. In Uganda, the national youth anthem refers to children as 'the pillars of tomorrow’s Uganda,' and in schools all around the country in 2000 and 2001, children sang and danced about the country’s new constitution and their role in national development.

This article argues that Ugandan children not only occupy a space of negotiation over national characteristics, but that, by claiming child identity positions relative to nationalist discourses, they also become significant social actors in the construction and negotiation of national identity. Drawing on fieldwork conducted at the Uganda Primary School Music, Dance, and Drama Festival, I will discuss how children engage common cultural identities to negotiate their places within the nation through ongoing cultural production. Children’s rights discourses encourage children’s active participation in social change while age-based authority and power prevent children from claiming those rights in their daily lives. Because children in the festival occupy the space of national identity and its reinvention, the festival also allows them to utilize the stage as a public space in which to critique the contradictions involved in children claiming full rights and citizenship.

Nation building is a dynamic and contested political project in which parents raise their children to become productive citizens. Both childhood and the nation are sites for sentimental identity and the articulation of beliefs about tradition and modernity. Throughout Africa, many governments seek to reconcile tradition and modernity in order to fashion locally-appropriate paths to national development and foster a singular national identity. Within this configuration, children become both repositories for cultural traditions and the objects of adults’ hopes for the future. In sum, they are explicitly targeted for assimilation into nationalist discourses. Yet we often think of childhood as a particularly apolitical space in which children do not yet fully participate in the duties and struggles of citizenship. The experiences of many children in contemporary Uganda suggest quite the opposite: that children are indeed at the forefront of certain struggles that are shaping the character of national identity. Children have a role in shaping shared notions of national identity and cultural representations of nationhood and childhood. Yet, children build collective and personal identities within the constraints of adult notions of childhood that directly impinge upon their experiences of childhood and the quality of their citizenship (James 1993: 72).

Several studies examine how children serve as subjects of nationalism. Few studies, however, focus on how children might interpret and respond to nationalist discourse in active and constructive ways. Children are often assumed to be under the direction of adults and adult-controlled social forces rather than being considered, as James and Prout have claimed, 'active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them, and the societies in which they live' (James et al. 1998: 4). Such
new paradigms in the study of childhood suggest that children engage with adults and other children in mutual processes of socialization, and that childhood must therefore be seen as a significant variable of social analysis, intertwined with others such as class, gender, or ethnicity.

‘Mutual process of socialization’ describes the objective of Uganda’s national primary school music festivals. I worked with the St. Michael’s Primary School children’s choir (most of whom were in fourth through sixth grade) as they trained for and competed in the early stages of the festival. I then followed the progress of the festival up through to the national level. I spoke with the performers, organizers, choir trainers, Ministry of Education officials, and so on. What I found was that the festival stage offered children a place to participate in the development of a new national culture by interpellating a national development discourse with which they were fast becoming familiar. But children also utilized the festival space to highlight gaps between nationalist aspirations that coopted children as symbols of the future and the daily realities they faced as powerless children, even within the structure of the festival itself.

National history, festivals, and children

Since independence in 1962, Uganda has gone through six changes of government, all of which have been violent. Inequalities that had grown during the colonial period were exacerbated upon independence by the absence of an integrated economy, lack of indigenous property owners, and the lack of a ruling class with the ability to ensure social stability (Kasozi 1994: 48). The Baganda were the ethnic group most advantageously positioned to do this by virtue of the favoritism shown them by colonial administrators, often at the expense of other indigenous ethnic groups. The colonial economy was based on cash cropping in Buganda and surrounding central and southern provinces where fellow Bantu speakers lived, while labor and law enforcement were primarily drawn from northern Sudanic/Nilotic ethnic groups. Ugandan historian A.B.K. Kasozi argues that the civil strife that ensued in the 1970s and 1980s can be attributed to the fact that economically-disadvantaged groups had control of the means of violence whereas the economically-advantaged groups had control of government resources. As a result, civilians often found themselves caught between violence issuing alternately from the army, the police, and rebel groups, most of which was politically motivated by ethnic allegiances and hatreds (Kasozi 1994).

President Yoweri Museveni’s National Resistance Army (NRA) came to power in 1986 on a platform of respect for human rights and freedom from the despotism of former leaders. His success in maintaining a modicum of peace and stability has been attributed by many Ugandans to the NRA’s respect for basic freedoms, decentralization of economic resources, an aggressive AIDS prevention campaign, the encouragement of free enterprise and a free press, and courting of international donors. Part of that courtship entailed becoming
more involved in international diplomacy through the United Nations, the World Bank, and an onslaught of non-governmental development activity in the 1990s. By becoming a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Ugandan government adopted a more Western-based children’s rights credo overseen by the Ministry of Social Welfare and the UNICEF country office. A new constitution was fashioned in 1995 by a widely representative Constitutional Assembly, and the government instituted a national development program that has become the canon of citizenship.

Schools are one of the most crucial institutions for social reproduction. Uganda’s National Resistance Movement government recognized this when they came to power. They saw a need to encourage national pride and unity among primary school students as part of educational reforms, in order to counteract the lingering social effects of years of civil war and ethnic conflict. One Ministry of Education representative, handing me a thick government white paper as proof, told me, ‘National development is the Bible of Ugandan education!’

The Ministry of Education and Sports sponsors the music festivals that arose out of this effort as part of the primary school curriculum each year. The festival consists of various drama, speech, music, and dance categories. Originally adapted from missionary-organized church music festivals, the concept was shifted to focus on AIDS dramas for sensitizing communities to the disease in 1985 and 1986 (Uganda Ministry of Education and Sports 1998). Today the Ministry designates a contemporary national development theme to each festival and requires that students create songs, dances, and dramas about it, utilizing traditional instruments and dance. According to the Ministry of Education, the festival themes are ‘designed to awaken awareness of the Uganda Society on the development taking place in the political and socio-economic arenas. Performances in this direction have enabled participants in particular and the public in general to derive knowledge, skills, creativity and behavioral change for tackling their day-to-day problems’ (ibid.: 2). In 2000 and 2001, the theme was ‘The Uganda Constitution (1995) and National Development.’ The children were to ‘Examine the Constitution of Uganda, 1995,’ and address through their performances ‘How [it is] likely to bring about national development’ (Uganda Ministry of Education and Sports 2000). The festival is run under the supervision of the National Music, Dance, and Drama Organizing Committee under the Ministry of Education, who set forth strict rules for the involvement of children at all levels of primary education. Performers are judged according to such criteria as tone, rhythm, costuming, form, and authenticity (ibid.: 2000). The government’s concern for the reconciliation of tradition and modernity is reflected in their curriculum for the festival, where children are to use traditional cultural elements to artistically convey modern, national development messages. Festival performance, then, is a discursive project where government and child citizens mutually invest themselves in building new notions of tradition and its role in the modern nation-state. Parents and the public are also invited to competitions, which start at the school level and culminate in the national competition between district finalists.
Festivals take place throughout the second school term. The chosen theme is typically distributed to schools sometime in the first term. Choir trainers invite children to join the choir and sometimes actively recruit talented children. Though the Ministry syllabus dictates that children be directly involved in the creative process of creating dances and writing songs, speeches, and plays, the degree to which that actually happens varies widely across schools and festival categories. At the particular school where I worked, the trainer wrote a number of the original compositions after soliciting poems from students, and the play and creative dance were written collectively out of conversations and improvised scenarios about violations of children’s rights that the students reported experiencing in their own lives. Other trainers tended to be much more autocratic, driven by stiff competitiveness, and students created few or none of their own entries.

Performances are typically high-energy, with incredibly talented musicians. ‘When it comes to music,’ a Ugandan friend once told me, ‘the children are the best!’ Reasons why people cite children as exceptional performers include their abundance of raw energy, often required to sustain the vigorous styles of Ugandan traditional music and dances; children’s lack of formal training in, for example, Western conventions of music; and the types of creative freedoms that children take when interpreting music and dance styles. In his remarks at the 2000 festival, the Inspectorate General of the Ministry of Education said about the performers, ‘They are committed; they are free; they are not shy.’ Adults tended to find these essentialized childhood attributes conducive to performance. In his work on social dramas and performance, Victor Turner claimed that:

> cultural performances are not simple reflectors or expressions of culture or even of changing culture but may themselves be active agencies of change, representing the eye by which culture sees itself and the drawing board on which creative actors sketch out what they believe to be more apt or interesting ‘designs for living.’

(Turner 1986: 24)

More than a few of the choir trainers and children I worked with likened their performative work to play and said that it was fun for children because of the element of pretend. But pretend has an important visionary social function within the controlled institution of the state-structured music festival, a place where children negotiate ‘a dramaturgical language about the language of ordinary role-playing and status-maintenance which constitutes communication in the quotidian social process’ (ibid.: 76), despite the fact that the space is highly structured for them by adult interlocutors and institutions. The word ‘play,’ far from denoting a lack of seriousness, has some important meanings, especially when we speak of the negotiation of identity (Thorne 1997; Schwartzman 1978). Play can also mean ‘an opportunity for action’ (Thorne 1997: 4–5). In the festival setting, children accomplish some very serious and important tasks of socialization through play, and the possibilities for social change lie in such playful experimentation.
While adult institutions such as the education system attempt to indoctrinate and socialize children in particular ways, adult Ugandans now see the involvement of children in the music festival as a normal function of national sociality and an exercise in good citizenship. They are happy to see children learn about their cultural heritage through performance, and they see it as constitutive of positive identity building. They feel that it provides a counterpoint to the growing influence of global/Western culture in their children’s lives through the media, and parents usually come away from the experience having learned something about the themes and performances from their children. For example, children performed skits under the festival theme of ‘The importance of immunization,’ in which they persuaded their own parents to immunize their children. Though it is difficult to know to what extent children’s festival performances were responsible, they may have had a hand in helping immunization campaign successes in recent years.

The fact that the state chooses the theme for each festival has several consequences: it determines topics of national concern for the populace, and it simultaneously reproduces and contemporalizes tradition as it is reconstructed through a new theme each year. It also reinforces top-down approaches to national identity construction that may bolster elite power.

Staged cultural events can serve as sites of ideological cooptation. In her work on state authoring of cultural festivals in the Philippines, Sally Ness argues that by choreographing a ‘traditional’ dance that participants imitate, the sinulog festival essentially reproduces a government-invented tradition (Ness 1998). Children, representative of generational continuity, are often targets of nationalist performances’ subtle messages and opulence, and are subsequently socialized into the government’s nationalist ideology.

Viewing state power over cultural events as indoctrinating is reasonable, yet it is important to point out that by opening spaces for discourse at such festivals the government is providing an arena for democratic participation in producing meanings and representations of culture. Participants and performers may reinforce, critique, or challenge dominant constructions of national identity, but the assumption by organizers and educators is that participation in national festivals will foster some sense of common identity and purpose.

Claiming children’s rights through a ‘culture of constitutionalism’

Aside from building national culture, the festival’s goals are to promote national development and create a ‘culture of constitutionalism’ through mass education about the contents of the constitution. These ideals were supposedly reflective of the sentiments of the general populace because of the highly participatory nature of the Constitutional Assembly that created it (Waliggo 1994). During the festival, children’s choirs took up a number of constitutional issues, but children’s rights were very popular. Through their performances, participants embraced their identities as children and displayed a sense of solidarity around
the issue of children’s rights. Children I worked with regularly cited the youth anthem to reiterate their central role in the nation, and they decried the ways that adults treated them. The children in the St. Michael’s choir told me at length about incidents of abuse and frequently sang a song called ‘The Ugandan Child’:

The Ugandan Child and the children all
Are precious things we must protect
Let us all join our hands
Together their rights we must defend!

Students in festival performances drew on this discourse of constitutionalism to reinforce positive children’s rights messages, but also to launch bold critiques of adult behavior towards them that does not follow the tenets of constitutional children’s rights. In one play, a mother wanted to marry off her young daughter, but the girl wanted to go to school instead. The father intervened, saying, ‘Are we educating this child for public opinion or for her own future?’ He mentioned the rights of children to education that are in the constitution, and the mother retorted, ‘Did the constitution produce my children?’ ‘The constitution has given these children power,’ the father replied. The mother continued to insist that a woman can only succeed by making a wise choice about who she marries. But eventually the father prevailed, the girl was educated, and she grew up to become a doctor who opened a dispensary and dug a few boreholes in her community.

Rhetorical questions like ‘Did the constitution produce my children?’ or statements challenging the authority of the government over people in their own homes were common jokes in the plays, but they likely reflected attitudes that children commonly overheard from adults in their communities, as many plays were based on children’s experiences. When the St. Michael’s choir decided what their play should be about, all agreed that mistreatment of a child should be in the play.

‘Who will mistreat this child?’ their teacher asked. Immediately they chorused, ‘Stepmother!’
‘Why stepmother? They are the ones who mistreat?’ he asked.
‘Yes!’
‘Who has got such an experience? Who can tell us about stepmothers? Maybe I don’t know much about them very well,’ he feigned.
‘Eee!’ they all moaned skeptically.

A UNICEF representative told me, ‘Most Ugandans have no idea what’s in the constitution, and if they did, they’d be furious!’ He claimed that they, like the characters in the play, would likely refuse to accept that the constitution, which overturns traditional, patriarchal values, has any jurisdiction over them, especially in their own domestic spheres. Some social and economic objectives listed in the constitution include respect for the rights of children, such as a right to education and health care (Uganda 1995). Despite these admirable goals, neither the state nor individual families always have the adequate means to actualize them. The constitution remains especially insignificant to rural areas, where children’s festival plays are often set. Village men and patriarchal,
traditional culture are cast as antagonists. Characters like this are popular stereotypes that epitomize all that is wrong about traditional culture: they are stubborn, irascible, against equality, anti-development, undemocratic, and just plain old. They usually act as comic relief in the plays, and their attitudes are overturned by the young, representing the triumph of progressive constitutional rights over anti-development patriarchy and traditional male privilege. For those groups whom the new constitution protects and uplifts, though, the children’s plays create scenarios in which villagers welcome the changes, and the dramas reinforce the idea that people should use constitutional protections and entitlements to uplift themselves, especially historically-disadvantaged groups like women, children, and the disabled. Joyce Othieno, MOE festival coordinator, claims that this is quite intentional. The goal, she says, is really to reach the audience more than the performers, because the young students will be exposed to the constitution through social studies in school. But the availability of the constitution is limited, and when it is available, it is in English. Othieno said that with Uganda lacking ‘a reading culture’ and being subject to various language barriers, the children, the school, and the arts become important conveyors of information: ‘We capitalize on the women and children because those are people whom we think have really been ignored.’ The literacy rate for women is very low, she explained, and they don’t have time to read, even if they can. They also lack reading materials. ‘So given that opportunity [to learn through watching performances], they are able ... to internalize and discuss, and act.’ In this way, the plays may actually reproduce their own positive scenarios in local communities by changing the audience members’ attitudes and informing them of their rights and responsibilities toward children.

Thus, the constitution is producing Ugandan children; that is, the explicit reference to children’s rights in the new constitution is meant to produce a new child subject through international rights discourses who is both more empowered in her community and more beholden to the state than the ideal children of more traditional, indigenous conceptions.

Children used festival categories such as plays and speeches to further a children’s rights discourse in which the welfare of children figures prominently in national development and therefore deserves protection. Many performers took the opportunity to talk about how children’s rights are being reformulated in relation to the nation and to contribute their voices to that reformulation. Many made a crucial link between freedom from oppression by adults guaranteed in the new constitution and their development into fully productive citizens: a ‘pillar of tomorrow’s Uganda’ cannot effectively support the nation if it is broken. Children’s attention to their national and international identities as children was rather impressive and at times politically savvy. They were very aware of how their status as children is metaphorically tied to the nation’s growth and development, and they used that link to argue for adult recognition of their own rights. One child even employed a baby metaphor for the (re)birth
of the nation, referring to Uganda as ‘a nation still in the womb,’ and the 1995 constitution as a ‘democratically developed child.’

Children’s interpretations of new Ugandan laws and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child show their approval of the special protections and entitlements particular to children. Not only in the national festivals, but also in smaller performance venues, children take certain liberties under the collectivism of the performance to issue complaints to their teachers and parents in the audience regarding issues such as child abuse and poor health care. At an end-of-the-year variety show put on by a primary school attended by friends’ children, a class recited a poem wherein they stomped their feet and pointed their fingers, shouting in unison, ‘Parents, STOP ABUSING CHILDREN!’ None of them would be likely to talk to a parent in such a manner individually, but the performance context allowed them to harness powerful children’s rights discourses to hold parents accountable for their obligations to protect and uphold children’s rights. Children can therefore use performance as a site of collective empowerment, thereby expressing their conscientious political and social views. The tactic often meets with success; one choir trainer I spoke to said that when his students sang an original composition about child abuse, ‘Many of the parents cried because the children had never spoken to them of such things before.’

Navigating the space of childhood identity

Children must negotiate their identities in areas where they experience tensions between disparate identity constructions of ideal children and childhood: children as nonproductive people who need to be provided for versus children as citizens in their own rights, currently contributing to national development; children as productive citizens while still deserving special protections as young people; children as historyless and memoryless versus children possessing national identities derived from a history of conflict; children simultaneously loyal to ethnic affiliation, local community, family, nation, and world while trying to integrate the particularities of childhood constructions at each level. Yet they often found themselves caught between the contradictory notions of the child subject position, their actual experiences as children, and the kinds of claims that people were making on them. As children’s rights discourses were rapidly proliferating through the Ugandan school system and government and NGO awareness campaigns, children were still targets of crime on a daily basis (e.g. defilement, abuse, and neglect), and these campaigns only heightened their awareness of their own perilous position in society. Others suffered from a lack of resources and security that prevented them from going to school or separated them from their families as a result of armed conflict.9

At one choir practice I attended the week before their first competition, the choir trainer lined up children who came in late against the wall and gave each of them two whacks on the buttocks with a switch. He yelled at some of them
for not coming to an earlier practice, even when called, and then trying to sneak in late to this one. He would occasionally justify his actions by carefully pointing out the necessity of beating as an efficient and effective means of discipline; as long as students skipped practices, the stick was required. Despite the heavy responsibilities placed on them, including three practices per day that took up practically all of their allotted leisure time at school, the teachers wanted to see carefree, happy childhoods reflected in their performances and their stage personae, through dance gestures and facial expressions as well as their tones of voice. Their teachers suggested that if the children were not actually happy, they should either force it or fake it; after all, they are children, and it is their right and obligation to enjoy their childhood. As their trainer pointed out, 'It is part of your children's rights!' The choir sat somewhat listless when they heard this, still feeling adult authority and the pressure of competition encroaching on their ability to truly enjoy what they were doing – and to be the 'happy' children they were expected to be – while the teachers remained oblivious to the irony of their own words.

Often it seemed that students did (and could do) nothing about it, but through performative devices such as satire in plays and identity negotiation in speeches, children utilized the festival stage to launch a critique of those very ideals it was intended to emulate. The children I worked with in the school choir were regularly caned and hit by the same people who told them of their rights: their teachers and parents. This left children both highly anxious about their own safety and feeling powerless to change their own situations of poverty and powerlessness.

In response, festival speakers often negotiated their powerless child identities by posing as adults – especially elected officials – emulating the model citizens they are expected to become. When fourth-grader Isaiah was led onto the stage at the national music festival finals, he sauntered out confidently with his hands relaxed and at his sides. He wore a double-breasted suit and tie to match his solemn expression, causing him to look much older than his ten-or-so years. Isaiah introduced himself as 'the RDC of Iganga,' at which the audience laughed: Iganga is a region in southeastern Uganda, and the Resident District Commissioner is a mid-level position in the current National Resistance Movement government – an office that could obviously never be occupied by a child. Isaiah addressed colleagues and peers of the RDC at length before beginning:

I would like to greet you and thank you, and I am telling you that even if it gets to sunset and dark, we have enough houses in this village for you to spend the night.
Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to talk about the issue of education, and more so, the education of a girl child.
It is really sad, my fellow Basoga friends, that we have this sorry state of neglecting the girl child. We have decided to take only boys to school and leave the girls to languish at home. You have given out your daughters to go and work as house girls at a tender age, denying them the right to education ... An entire female generation is remaining behind just because of your selfishness.
Today, I want you to go when you have seen the light [laughs]. We elected people to go and make the constitution. It was made, promulgated, and now it is in full force. The 1995 Uganda constitution gives all citizens a right to education. Chapters 4 and 4.30 state that all Ugandans have a right to education, and furthermore, it encourages affirmative action in favor of a marginalized group of people. Here, a girl child can say, the girl child is marginalized in society [audience agrees]. It is the girl child who cooks and it is the girl child who goes for water [audience agrees]. It is the girl child who takes the goats out to graze as well as the associated domestic work [audience agrees]. And you cannot give the girl child the opportunity to go to school!? [In disgust] Ah! [Audience erupts in laughter.]

Fellow tribesmen, I want to remind you that a country's development depends on the education of its people. If you educate a boy, the culture will be one-sided, and you have educated an individual. But if you educate a girl, you have educated the WHOLE nation [applause]. Fellow tribesmen, I want to remind you that it is the girls who are the mothers of the nation and the mothers of the world. Ladies and Gentlemen, the ball is in your hands. I wish you a safe journey back home. Thank you very much for listening.

As he spoke, Isaiah strode confidently back and forth across the stage, used dramatic pauses, employed hand gestures, and furled his brow in a manner more typical of an old man than a 10-year-old. In essence, his presentation strategy was to adopt the identity and behavior of an adult – through posture, authority, and the appearance of independence and experience – in order to speak authoritatively about the rights of certain children. Further, Isaiah chose to imitate a representative of the state, a Resident District Commissioner. In this manner, his status as a 10-year-old subverted the ultimate authority of the state through mimetic imitation and satire. It was an ironic but extremely effective strategy. Other children who chose to speak from the subject position of a child received less audience attention and respect. Whereas audience members spoke to each other or fidgeted during other performances, Isaiah held the audience's attention throughout his speech, and his ability to unsettle generational authoritative hierarchy by mocking state agents was met with emphatic audience approval.

While the speech employed some important devices that illustrate how competing or disparate identities are reconciled in the festival context, it is also indicative of some dilemmas that children face when trying to claim authority and control over self-representation and rights. Though it was obvious that he had been heavily coached by his trainers, Isaiah provides an illustration of how, to claim their rights, children must usurp the proclaimed power of that position and identify as an adult to be heard. This strategy necessarily falls back on a fundamental distinction between children’s rights and other human rights: children’s rights are actually protections rather than rights that directly empower children themselves. Thus, the power to enact and defend these rights lies outside the bearers; adults must be the stewards of these rights by acting ‘in the best interest’ of children (Franklin 1986; Ennew and Milne 1990). Isaiah draws on the power of adult authority to bolster his argument, yet part of that
power still has to do with the audience’s recognition that the speaker is actually a child. That acknowledgment also lends power to his words by highlighting the child’s ability to adopt and deliver an adult authoritative voice. Thus, the child subject position works simultaneously – and seemingly contradictorily – on a number of levels to both free children of their burdens and convince adults of their productive possibilities.

Establishing educational authority

During the 2000 festivals, the announcers would ask the audience, ‘Have you heard what this child has said? Have you gotten the message?’ It might seem difficult for children to achieve any narrative authority as children within a society that still strongly links age to status, but one way they manage to do so is through tactics similar to the Ugandan radio songs discussed by Helen Mugambi (1997). Popular music artists of the early independence period adopted the authoritative styles of traditional oral narratives to convey a message of national unity, which was spread effectively through broadcast technology: ‘artists use structured openings [to radio songs] as a means of reassembling, re-creating, or reconfiguring Uganda as a multiethnic nation’ (Mugambi 1997: 212). Like radio songs, children’s festival songs may begin by employing traditional narrative phrasing such as, ‘Relatives, friends, here is my story’ (ibid.: 208). Many African original compositions, for example, take the form of a village meeting with an interested and attentive audience. This was the winning school’s format in 2001:

Soloist: All of you residents are welcome, please.
Choir: Ah we got here a long time ago and sat.
Soloist: Oh friends
[Choir repeats each of the soloists’ lines]
All of you residents are welcome, please.
Oh friends, all of you women and men are welcome.
You’ve given me encouragement, friends.
I invited you because of what is going on in our village. [× 2]
Resident Kabunga, I’m glad to see you [shakes hands with him].
Madam Nalubowa [the drunkard],
come on come on [while signaling her to get closer to the group].
Settle down and I’ll tell you the reason for the invitation.
The reason for this invitation regards our constitution.
You have to know about the constitution.
Oh friends, that is why you’ve been invited.
Now settle down and know what the constitution says ...

According to its organizers, the festival encourages a reversal of educational authority in this way. As Mrs. Othieno pointed out, children participating in the festivals are often informing their elders about important social issues. The MOE has aptly recognized that children, given their special aptitude for cultural learning, should be targeted for such a task. As Hirschfeld (2002) points out, ‘the child brings to bear specialized cognitive skills and domain-specific programs that make development possible (Hirschfeld and Gelman 1994)’. ‘In a sense, the
novice is the expert: an expert at learning ... culture cannot be understood except in terms of the cognitive architecture of children and the specialized learning mechanisms that the architecture affords' (Hirschfeld 2002: 616). Further, I would argue that children are suited to formulate reconfigurations of cultural constructs because of their ability for interpretive learning. As their performances in the festival show, they are sharp cultural observers, able to discern the positive and negative aspects of both tradition and cultural change. Performance helps bring all of these elements together to be constantly renegotiated – through rescriptings of the cultural past and interpretations of the present state of national identity. Many critics (see Bhabha 1986: 11) have likened this to the palimpsest, a writing surface used one or more times after earlier writing has been erased. But reinscribing the slate does not mean that the former text has been completely obliterated. It may still be legible and its meanings may actually have been built upon in its reinscriptions. Writing about this concept in particular relation to post-colonial Africa, Ranger and Werbner state:

The cultural politics of identity plays dynamically upon that palimpsestual tension ... to negate, renegotiate, or playfully compromise present authority. In turn, it also reaffirms authority, or its possibility, by counteracting the traces of colonial and precolonial sociality within the post-colonial.

(Werbner and Ranger 1996: 4; my emphasis)

Children creatively employ this mechanism in the festivals, through the play of form and meaning, reaffirming their own authority over cultural meaning. For example, in the 1996 final competition, whose theme was the importance of freedom and the integrity of the new constitution (the drafting of which was almost finished at that time), many skits involved parodies of notorious characters in Uganda’s history, from white colonists to guerrilla soldiers to dictator Idi Amin. Through their mimetic gestures, performers criticized the legitimacy of former rulers. But when children began to dance ballots into boxes and march triumphantly to the front of the stage with constitution in hand, they showed respect for the accomplishments of their current government and democratic principles.

The socially productive space of performance

In national music festivals, children and childhood become important discursive objects in relation to the construction of the nation. Drawing on Bourdieu’s metatheory of practice, Holland et al. point out that:

the improvisations that are characteristic of all social behavior make a difference to the habitus of the next generation. That is, the forms of novel activity created by a senior generation provide the experiential context in which their children develop the habitus of the group.

(Holland et al. 1998: 45)

If we agree with Bourdieu and Holland, then adults have, literally and figuratively, ‘set the stage’ for children exploring issues of national identity through the figured world of the music festivals. But it is equally possible that
these improvisations effect change immediately, such as through child–child and child–adult socialization.

The festival design allows children to utilize the stage as a forum for experimenting with their social realities and bridging ideal social structure laid down in the law with the current structures of daily life that prevent them from attaining full citizenship rights due to their status as children. Though festival activities can be highly structured by adult trainers and festival organizers, children tend to negotiate the boundaries laid out for them quite skillfully and productively. Providing that space for children may facilitate their socialization into dominant discourses on the character of national identity, but we mustn’t assume that children are simply interpellated without critically engaging the ideas imposed upon them. By seeing such events as sites where adults and children, government and populace engage in mutually-constitutive imaginings of contemporary Uganda, we may start to understand the ways in which children actively shape the ideologies of the societies in which they live. The festivals become crucial sites in which children can effect social change and create alternative discourses, cooperatively interpreting nationalism and citizenship from their own viewpoints as well as fashioning their own places within them, thereby transforming the very ideals of national belonging from which their identities derive.

Cultural performance can thus serve as a mechanism for the negotiation and improvisation of national identity by allowing children to locate themselves within and across public space which makes certain claims on children but from which they are typically excluded, and in which their voices are regularly silenced. When the audience is listening, they are invited by child citizens to rethink their own ideas about citizenship, community, and national identity, and to redraw conceptual boundaries that limit children’s capacity for social action. Through critical engagement and improvisational play, children can and do make important contributions to the process of building national identity and civil society, but adults are still ultimately the gatekeepers to that process. Its effectiveness as an exploratory space for such negotiations will depend on positive and engaged participation by all involved.

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Notes

1. Children as young as 8 years old who were orphaned by conflict were often enlisted by rebel groups to fight for liberation. The National Resistance Army enlisted the help of about 6,500 child soldiers to liberate the country (Okumu 1997).
2. Uganda was one of the first sub-Saharan African countries hit hard by the AIDS virus in the 1980s, and the subsequent success of Uganda in containing the spread of the disease has often been attributed to the National Resistance Movement government’s rapid action, which included openness about AIDS to facilitate prevention and calls for assistance from the international community.

3. However, the Ministry recently introduced a 'Western music' category as well. The rules are similar to those of other categories in that 'standard' conventions of that type of music must be followed. They do not elaborate on what this means.

4. The Uganda National Music, Dance, and Drama Festival Syllabus for 2000 and 2001 states, ‘Each dance has its prescribed costumes that must be used, without which the beauty and identity of that dance is destroyed’ (Uganda Ministry of Education and Sports 2000: 4).

5. Concerning authenticity, the syllabus asks, ‘Is the dance as authentic or original as it should be in its own ethnic area?’ This question, of course, is not as transparent as it is designed to be. There are many different interpretations and uses of authenticity. See, for example, Bendix 1997.

6. While children are considered ‘natural’ dancers, and stereotypes of Africans as having an inherent propensity for rhythm abound, my observations during choir practices were that children worked very hard to master the dance moves they were being taught. The choir instructor told me that traditional dance was usually the hardest category to coach.

7. Ness’s idea.

8. The 'Evil Stepmother’ trope is prevalent in Uganda, mainly predicated on experience and eye-witnessing. Ugandan stepmothers are purported to abuse and neglect their stepchildren on a regular basis, allocating their precious few resources to their own children and letting their stepchildren go without. When I asked people why, they would speculate that because of limited resources and jealousy between women, stepmothers vehemently resent having to care for another woman’s children when they marry a man who already has children. The courts are not involved in most cases of abuse, whether the stepmother is involved or not.

9. A civil war still rages in northern Uganda, where a quasi-religious rebel movement called the Lord’s Resistance Army abducts and forcibly-conscripts children, brutally disciplining them into soldiers. The LRA has caused massive destruction and displacement for the people of that region.

References


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