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Memory, innocence and nostalgia: other versions of African childhood in two African texts

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Abstract: There are a number of memoirs/autobiographies and biographies by African writers on their childhoods in Africa. However, many of these texts tend to focus mostly on the child protagonist's experiences of colonialism, slavery, war, death and deprivation. This article moves away from these narratives of deprivation and trauma, focusing on other versions of African childhoods where the child lives a carefree life devoid of danger and scarcity of resources. Using Camara Laye's *The Dark Child* and Wole Soyinka's *Aké: The Years of Childhood* and doing a textual analysis of the content, themes and characters, this article argues that these texts can be read as recollections of nostalgia and memories of a carefree time in the life of two African children, a time that the narrators reminisce upon through the act of retelling in order to revisit the joys and innocence of those days.

Keywords: Memory, nostalgia, African childhood, innocence, *The Dark Child*, *Aké: The Years of Childhood*.

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Introduction

Autobiographies of childhood most commonly take the form of an adult author writing about events from his or her childhood (Douglas 2010). The autobiography of childhood has been seen as a diverse subgenre of autobiography. Examples of this subgenre include *Becoming* (2018) by Michelle Obama, *Dreams in a time of War* (2010) by Ngugi wa' Thiong'o, *Dreams from my Father* (1995) by Barack Obama and *Taking Flight* (2014) by Michaela DePrince. Autobiographies of childhood are widely read and have gained popularity and, sometimes notoriety primarily through their representations of traumatic childhoods, particularly autobiographical depictions of child abuse as pertains in *The Abandoned Baobab* (1983) by Ken Bugul, *Reflections of Mamie—A Story of Survival* (2013) by Rosemary Mamie Adkins, *Dear Teddy* (2012) by J.D. Stockholm, and *I know why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) by Maya Angelou. As Douglas (2010: 3) notes, at best, autobiographies of childhood have been praised for bringing 'child abuse to public attention' and becoming tools for advocacy; 'at worst, these books have been criticised for being exploitative, unethical, and even voyeuristic in their representation of child subjects.' Such responses are perhaps not surprising when we consider that in the cultural contexts within which these texts appear, there is now an intense socio-cultural interest in the child.

There are African autobiographies that detail the trauma that children go through as a result of war, abandonment, poverty and racial and tribal disturbances. Texts such as the *Soft Vengeance of a Freedom fighter* (1990) by Albie Sachs, *The House at Sugar Beach* (2008) by Helene Cooper, *The Devil that danced on Water* (2002) by Aminatta Forna, and *The Abandoned Baobab: The Autobiography of a Senegalese woman* (1983) by Ken Bugul fall under this category. This article, however, moves away from the stark and painful representation of a deprived African childhood, and rather focuses on the autobiographies of African childhood that depict happier times for the author who looks back with nostalgia. In the selection of texts for this article, it is argued that by recalling childhood stories, writers identify with their child self and express nostalgia for a lost world. The texts used are referred to as 'autobiographical' because they are published self-narratives in which the author and the protagonist are the same person.

The thrust of this article is to discuss Camara Laye's *The Dark Child* and Wole Soyinka's *Aké: The Years of Childhood* as recollections of a carefree time in the life of two African children; a time that the narrators go back to in the retelling to revisit the joys and innocence of those days. The selection of Laye's *The Dark Child* and Soyinka's *Aké* for this discussion is premised on the fact that they are reflections of African childhoods that are bereft of the usual deprivation and trauma seen in many African autobiographies of childhood, and thus would better afford the author the opportunity to look at other versions of African childhood in African literary texts.

Secondly, they are true narratives of childhood as the stories end with the child narrator on the cusp of adulthood; the narratives do not go beyond the childhood years. This article reflects on these texts as commentaries of the lives of the narrators on their childhood that were positive and enabling for their development as adults, working on the claim that these texts are celebrations of the innocence of an idyllic childhood that the narrators describe with nostalgia. The question of why these two texts is answered in Sow (2010), who sees a significant similarity between the two autobiographies. He argues that both texts have a similar narrative configuration, a shared ideological and historical coherence as well as a shared experience of the final periods of colonial rule, and beginning of political instabilities. Sow argues that in African literature,

> Childhood autobiographical narratives are regularly seen as responsive to historical junctures, and as exploring a repressive situation, or racial, gender, and/or class prejudice, recalling the drama of early life and character formation. It is a genre perceived as emblematic, a symbolic literary form, which has called for narrative codifications, ideological expectations and determinations, categorisation, and often exclusion. At the same time, several important texts—including L 'enfant noir and Aké—are not constructed around these dominant patterns. By their difference, they remind us of the diversity and plurality of African childhood experiences according to societies, places, political contexts, and historical moments (499).

Authors and texts

Aké: The Years of Childhood (1981), described as Wole Soyinka's childhood memoir, details the author's life from his infancy until he leaves home for further schooling at around 12 years of age. The memoir focuses on his growing intelligence, curiosity, and impetuous nature. Soyinka describes his relationships with his parents, siblings, and the other members of his extended family. Soyinka comes from a Christian home. His father is the headmaster of St. Peter's Primary school at Aké and his great grandfather was the Most Rev. J.J. Ransome-Kuti who was a teacher, and a Christian leader who converted people to the Christian faith through his versatility in rendering English gospel hymns into indigenous gospel songs. Ransome-Kuti became a deacon in 1895, was ordained a priest in 1897 and appointed district judge from 1902 to 1906. In 1911, he was appointed pastor of St Peter's Cathedral Church, Aké, after previously serving as superintendent of the Abeokuta Church Mission. In 1922, he was made canon of the Cathedral Church of Christ, Lagos and in 1925, he became the first Nigerian to release a record album after he recorded several Yoruba language hymns in gramophone through Zonophone Records. The nature of the family is reflected in the narrative through their mother, who is nicknamed 'Wild Christian' because of her faith and desire to convert everyone to Christianity. In addition to their Christian values, their home is very strict with rules to live by. Any infraction has a punishment, and Soyinka's

parents do not spare the rod. With parents who are engaged in economic activities, he and his siblings are financially comfortable and can afford to take tea, bread, butter and eggs for breakfast, delicacies only a few could afford then.

Soyinka indicates his fascination with Yoruba culture and practices right from the beginning of the narrative. As a young boy he is interested in the stories of the wood spirits, *òrò* and ghosts that are said to inhabit the woods around their house. He also expresses his love for the Yoruba foods eaten at home and his interest in the traditional leadership of his people exemplified in the *Odemo* of Isara and the Alake's palace and the *ogboni*. This blend of Yoruba heritage and his Christian background is what Olakunle George (2008) refers to as a complex hybridisation of traditional Yoruba norms and Western, Christian modernity leading to Soyinka emerging as a nationalist instead of a more ethnic or religiously inclined individual. Maduakor (1986) thus examines all these experiences recounted by Soyinka as contributing factors of his personal development which confirm the present view of Soyinka as a non-conformist. To Maduakor, the influence of the family on the development of the child is very significant. He gives an instance that Soyinka's present distrust for government and justice can be traced to his distrust for his parents' perception of justice and discipline at home. Inasmuch as it is accepted that the sum total of Soyinka's childhood experiences invariably affects his adult personality, I would like to reiterate that this narrative should not only be read as a way of finding the nuances in the works of the older Soyinka but also read as a yearning on the narrator's part for his lost childhood. As indicated by Iva Gilbertova (1993: 78–79):

> *Aké* is then a book about childhood, powerful and understandable anywhere in the world. It is about the great and admired, beloved and frightening, ridiculous and bizarre figures that a child meets on the way. It speaks about houses and rocks, about a thousand smells and tastes, about adventure, about lies and sincerity, about pain, hope and disappointment, about friendship. It is also a book about the world of adults perceived through a child's eyes.

This article discusses *Aké* as a bildungsroman of a young boy making his way through life in his community and learning to navigate that space for himself. It is in that same context of bildung that Jeyifo (2014) agrees that *Aké* is not one of the regular bildungsroman by African writers. Jeyifo asserts that this peculiarity warrants that Soyinka's *Aké* be perceived as an account of a process of unique individual development, where the autobiography is seen as the narration of Soyinka's awareness of a remarkable sense of his own peculiarity against the values and expectations of his family, hometown, nation and the world.

The autobiography is not a chronological narration of the events in Soyinka's childhood; rather, the narrative is made up of significant memorable events that the author shares with his audience. Of these, Moolla (2012) posits that the most abstrusely symbolic event in Soyinka's *Aké* is the occasion when the young protagonist receives

arc-shaped slashes on his ankles and wrists from his paternal grandfather which ritually and physically mark his transition from childhood to adulthood. According to Moolla, the scarification of the protagonist holds great spiritual, physical and emotional significance to his development. She explains that scarification among the protagonists' ethnic group, the Yoruba, literally and metaphorically embodies the road in an individual's life journey. Moolla further states that the Yoruba believe that scarification is a puberty rite initiated by its tutelary deity, Ògún who is the revered god of iron, the patron deity of metalworkers and body artists. Ritual scarification thus acts as a catalyst to the individual's self-realisation through artistic creativity. Moolla then suggests that the creative artistry of Soyinka can be traced to the inspiration he receives in his childhood ritual scarification.

Camara Laye narrates his childhood in *The Dark Child* (1954); the autobiography was recognised as one of the most important pieces of contemporary prose from French-speaking Africa. Laye's family were of the Malinké people, who retained their ancestral animist religion, despite the region's overall conversion to Islam several centuries ago. His father, Camara Komady, was a blacksmith and goldsmith and a descendent of the Camara clan, which traced its genealogy back to the thirteenth century. His mother, Dâman Sadan, also came from a family of blacksmiths.

Although sometimes criticised for not engaging with the French experience of colonialism, *The Dark Child* has been exonerated by critics who have found this to be far from the truth. Belcher (2007) shows that Laye's *The Dark Child* contains subtle strategies of resistance against French colonialism. She says that even though the novel does not directly oppose French rule like other anti-colonial texts, it uses the device of rhetorical indirection to express resistance. According to Belcher, African characters performing ignorance or stupidity, lying convincingly, deploying flattery, mistranslating, coding speech with subtext, and remaining silent are some forms of rhetorical indirection. Belcher claims:

> *L'Enfant noir* ... is an autobiography of the author's childhood in Koroussa, French Guinea, a traditional village little touched by Westernization. The book presents a largely positive memory of the joys of village life, with participation rather than resistance as its focus. In fact, the novel has been critiqued for exhibiting too little resistance to French colonialism, either direct or indirect. While the text clearly lacks any direct resistance (there are no revolutions, no rabble-rousing journalists, no showdowns with colonial officers), there are several elucidating cases of indirect resistance (70).

In spite of the 'elucidating cases of indirect resistance' found in the text as indicated above by Belcher, this article sees that as a different engagement from its primary concern, which is not on finding ways to read *The Dark Child* as form of resistance against French colonisation; but rather, to to read and discuss this text as a portrait of an African childhood.

Another prominent concern as far as critical reception to this book has been, is the important place of education in Laye's novel. Toko (2007) sees the traditional values of the African as the foundation of education and the mastery of Western technology and science. He observes that Laye's novel outlines the clash between African traditions and Western culture imposed by colonisation. He asserts that Laye portrays himself as a specimen of the contemporary African who constantly glides between black tradition and white civilisation. According to Toko, the introduction of the protagonist to his family totem in Kouroussa by his father begins the clash between traditional education and colonial school. He reveals that the fear of Laye's father concerning the difficulty in transferring all his totemic traditions and profession of his caste to his son is legitimate. Again, Toko recounts that all the other participants of the initiation are presented with symbols of their father's caste except the protagonist whose father presents him with a book and a pen: symbols of White civilisation.

Like *Aké*, *The Dark Child* is also read as a bildungsroman of a young man growing from childhood to adulthood. Hayes (2008) examines the idea of male identity in Laye's work and places the novel in the category of a male colonial bildungsroman where the subject matter or central idea of the novel is Laye's journey to becoming a man; his apprenticeship to masculinity. Hayes focuses more on the process of development that the protagonist goes through from his childhood through his initiation/puberty and later his manhood or adulthood.

This transition is also addressed in Philipson's (1989) work where he critically studies Laye's transition from childhood to adulthood and argues that this occurs when Laye realises the important role that the world outside his community plays in his development. According to Philipson, the parents of the protagonist and his community are active agents of development. However, growth is not a prerogative of the family space alone, real growth of the protagonist occurs when he leaves his comfort zone to experience the Western world all on his own. Philipson is of the view that the childhood of the African and the state of colonisation are both stages that need to be outgrown.

In the light of the pre-existing critical writings on virtually all imaginable aspects of these two most influential texts on childhood, one may wonder why we need to go back to these texts in the year 2022 when there are more recent and yet to be exhausted texts on childhood in other parts of Africa. This revisiting has become essential primarily because African childhoods as expressed in the literature appear monolithic. According to Ainehi Edoro (2016), childhood in African fiction is, 'a brutal affair. It has often been represented as a nightmare of violence, rape, war, and everything in-between.' It appears then as if there are no other depictions of African childhoods in African literature. Uwem Akpan's *Say You Are One of Them* (2008) and Uzodinma Iweala's *Beast of No Nation* (2005) are examples of novels that showcase image after image of African children being hurt and brutalised. Stories like these

have their value, Edoro claims, however, the important thing to remember is that these novels do not have to define how we imagine the world of childhood in an African context. And it is on this premise that this article reads *Aké* and *The Dark Child* as other versions of African childhoods.

Aké: incessant curiosity and the making of an intellectual

Right from the beginning of the text, the reader is introduced to Soyinka's curious nature. He questions everything around him and wants to investigate everything. His incessant questioning is perceived by his mother as a sign of disobedience; however, Soyinka's rational mind wants to find meaning in the many contradictions in the adult world. When told the story of how his mother and her brother had been punished for disobeying their uncle and venturing into the woods behind the parsonage, where a wood sprite had chased them, Soyinka felt that, 'the fright should have sufficed as punishment' (Soyinka 1981: 7)

In considering punishment in his own household and the Aké community, Soyinka thinks that most of the punishment consists of humiliation. In pondering the case of a thief or a bed wetter who is paraded through town for everyone to see their shame, he wonders why people would turn out to see such punishment. This was what he was afraid of when his mother, Wild Christian, catches him eating the abandoned tin of powdered milk in the pantry. In his bid to escape such humiliation, should it come to that, he prepares to run away from home. His lack of understanding of the adult world, which clearly indicates his state as a child is also seen when he fights Dipo, his younger brother, on the urging of his family and then he is chastised for trying to kill his brother, 'I was overwhelmed by only one fact—that there was neither justice nor logic in the world of grown-ups' (Soyinka 1981: 104).

As indicated by Jeyifo (2014), there is a peculiarity to Soyinka that sets him apart from many other children. His curiosity is quite exceptional that at age four, he follows a police band for miles away from his home to several towns over. He opens the gate of their compound and goes to the church grounds to see what was making all the noise he was hearing. And being curious, he follows a procession of the police band as it marches along the road followed by a motley crowd made up of children and adults. As he follows the band that moves further and further from his home, he pays attention to what is going on around him, the various people and places he sees, 'there were shops and storey-buildings. And there were inscriptions everywhere: AKINS PHOTO STUDIO: LONDON TRAINED PORTRAITIST, then in smaller letters: A Trial will Convince You' (Soyinka 1981: 38). He says that he can no longer see the parsonage wall but he is not worried as he is too enraptured by the emergence of the proper shape and sizes; of 'those token bits and pieces of Aké which had entered our

home on occasions' (Soyinka 1981: 38), as exemplified by his sighting of the corn-mill, Miss McCutter's Maternity clinic, where he sees for the first time, the name McCutter which he knew as Makota.

Evidence of his innocence and naivety is seen when he feels reassured by the fact that the houses along the road he is traversing are all linked together by either a roof or fence. The band goes through the market just before Ibara where he is introduced to a variety of food stuffs and products. Later, he finds himself abandoned and all alone with the police band when it enters a compound. The officers are amazed to learn that he has come all the way from Aké. They send him home and the family is very astonished at what he has done. But being the little boy that he is, he does not grasp the enormity of the situation: that he could have gotten lost easily.

Soyinka's curiosity makes him follow his sister as she goes off to school. Although he can see and hear the older pupils as they have their morning assembly, as he lives on the school compound being the child of the headmaster, he cannot see his sister Tinu amongst them, and this is what fuels his curiosity all the more. Thus, he decides that he is going to school. He plans and discreetly follows Tinu and Lawanle, Tinu's escort, to school. When he is discovered, his infectious joy at being in school causes the teacher to let him stay. All children are born with an innate curiosity to explore their world (Perry 2001); however, this curiosity must be nurtured or developed in young children, otherwise it will be lost. Soyinka's curious nature is nurtured by some members of his family such as his father, grandfather, his father's friends, who generally do not suppress his natural precociousness, and also by his environment that contains many elements to fuel a child's imagination. Although as already indicated every child is curious, Soyinka's curiosity is not curtailed, thus allowing him to become more questioning and contemplative.

These qualities of the young Soyinka—his questioning and curious spirit and contemplative mood—contribute to his intelligence by making him perceptive. This becomes evident when he finds it strange that the adults discuss the children as if the children are not present. One day when he fights with the maid bathing him, he claims he wants to bath himself. When accused of being afraid of water by his family, Soyinka retorts that he is not afraid of water; how could he be when he likes to go bath in the rain? He then engages in a lively discussion on whether rain is not water, with his father. His argumentative nature is a form of exasperation for his mother, but his father actually encourages it, perhaps finding in it signs of a budding intellectual. Another instance is when his father, popularly known as Essay, is informed that Soyinka had questioned how the Sexton at church could prove that out of all the people in church, he had been the one talking. Finding the logic in the little boy's argument, Essay had barely managed to hold onto his laughter, conceding that indeed, that would be a difficult thing to prove.

Soyinka's childhood in an environment where his curiosity and questioning nature is encouraged (although his mother tries to subdue this nature) affords him the opportunity to grow into an intelligent person. This enabling environment is not reflective of many childhood experiences in Africa at the time. He was lucky to have found himself in the home of an educated man who allowed children to be seen and heard.

The young narrator makes references to his absent-mindedness as a child. These absent-minded episodes are lamented by his mother who persistently informs his father of the need to cure him of it before it is too late. Once, lost in his own world, he flogs his father's beautiful new rosebushes to shreds without being aware of what he is doing. This particularly scares him because he is his father's number one gardener who jealously tends his father's rose bushes (Soyinka 1981: 75). The second incidence occurs when, lost in his own world again, he accidentally causes his father's hunting gun to go off and make a hole in the ceiling of the sitting room.

In spite of these escapades, Soyinka is portrayed as a sensitive child. When his baby sister, Folasode, dies on her first birthday, his parents think the children too young to understand death and so they try to make light of the whole situation, but young Soyinka would have none of it:

> Suddenly, it all broke up within me. A force from nowhere pressed me against the bed and I howled. As I was picked up, I struggled against my father's soothing voice, tears all over me. I was sucked into a place of loss whose cause or definition remained elusive. I did not comprehend it yet, and even through those tears I saw the astonished face of Wild Christian, and heard her voice saying, 'But what does he understand of it? What does he understand?' (Soyinka 1981: 98).

In this passage, contrary to the mother's question, the young boy understands that his sister is gone forever, and it surprises him that the family does not want to acknowledge that change. This marks a phase in the young boy's life as we see him growing from a place of innocence to awareness. This growing maturity is demonstrated in his constant questioning of his parents 'ever-ready recourse to the cane for every infraction' (Soyinka 1981: 124), and his interrogation of the act of prostrating before men as pertains in Isara, his father's hometown (Soyinka 1981: 127). It finally culminates in the cutting of feet ceremony his grandfather subjects him to as a way of inoculating him against dangers in secondary school.

In his recollection of these memories, what is exhibited is Soyinka's childhood's environment which provides him with the opportunity to grow into the intellectual he becomes, the man who questioned and still questions every why and wherefore; the man who does not take things at face value but must investigate to find why they are so.

The Dark Child: memory and nascent manhood

Just as Soyinka's recollection of childhood memories in his autobiography highlights his contented childhood days, so does Laye's autobiography reflects the happiness he experiences in his childhood days. Whereas critics have indicated that Laye is reluctant to engage in a racial discourse in his work, Avono (2018) actually says that Laye's refusal to engage with the politics of race in his work, 'erases France, and thus distorts race for its francophone African audience' (Avono 2018: 93). Avono goes on to argue that Laye prefers to be European than African. It can be deduced from Avono's statements that he misinterprets Laye's nostalgia for his hometown and family. It is pertinent to say that this article focuses on a re-reading of the autobiography from a different perspective to throw more light on the other facets of this autobiography that have hitherto been relegated to the fringes of scholarly discussions on the text. Consequently, this article moves away consciously from debates on colonialism and race and fixes its attention solely on the adult narrator who looks back with nostalgia at his childhood home and life.

Nostalgia is closely related to memory. The recollection of memories propels nostalgic feelings in a person. Researchers indicate that memory is the process of taking in information from the world around us, processing it, storing it and later recalling that information, sometimes many years later. A complex type of memory that allows us to recall and even re-live personal events or episodes from our past is referred to as autobiographical memory. This type of memory forms our personal history or autobiography and is closely linked to another type of memory—spatial memory and navigation, which allows us to learn and remember how to find our way around the world. Thus, the recall of his childhood experiences invokes in Laye, nostalgia for his childhood days. Hepper *et al.* (2012: 114) define nostalgia as,

> ... a complex emotion that involves past-oriented cognition and a mixed-affective signature, and is often triggered by encountering a familiar smell, sound, or keepsake, by engaging in conversations, or by feeling lonely. When waxing nostalgic, one remembers, thinks about, reminisces about, or dwells on a memory from one's past—typically a fond, personally meaningful memory such as one's childhood or a close relationship.One often views the memory through rose-tinted glasses, misses that time or person, longs for it, and may even wish to return to the past. As a result, one typically feels emotional, most often happy but with a sense of loss and longing; other less common feelings include comfort, calm, regret, sadness, pain, or an overall sense of bittersweetness.

Thus, nostalgia is seen in terms of loss, mourning and the impossibility of return. This is the emotion most pervasive in Laye's autobiography. In his recollections of memories of the past, he evinces this nostalgia. One of Laye's earliest memories is of him playing around his father's hut as a young child of perhaps five years. This memorable experience is so vivid in his mind that it opens the narrative. He also describes

an incident with a snake one day around the hut. He sees a snake creeping around his father's hut, and to emphasise his innocence and naivety, he goes round to play with it, putting a reed into the snake's mouth. As the snake swallows the reed, Laye laughs (Laye 1954: 18); completely oblivious to the danger he is in. This institutes the age of innocence in the young child. In the midst of the commotion that ensues when the adults find out what he is doing and carry him away from danger, young Laye cries and promises his mother that he would not play that game again, 'although the game still didn't seem dangerous to me' (Laye 1954: 18).

Another childhood memory that resurfaces in the narration is his fascination with the railroad that passes by their hut. He would spend a lot of time there watching the iron rails. His fascination with snakes is also seen here at the rail roads where he is intrigued by the snakes that would be found crawling in the hot road bed. He often wonders what attracts these snakes to the hot rail roads. These incidents are evidence of his innocence and naivety as he fails to comprehend the danger all around him. This innocence is what makes childhood accounts most attractive. Although there is a wealth of research and debate on what constitutes childhood innocence,[1] I limit my definition of innocence in this article to children's simplicity, their lack of knowledge, and their purity of intentions not yet spoiled by mundane affairs. Laye's lack of fear of the dangers of playing on the railroads with the snakes is interpreted as a time in his life when danger and fear have not been instilled in him yet. Recalling these events, therefore, indicate the author's longing for this lost innocence.

In his description of his father's craft and work in precious minerals, Laye shows the beginning of his training in blacksmithing. The first rule of apprenticeship is to watch, before the apprentice is allowed to help with the actual work. Unfortunately for Laye, western education separated him from his father's craft and denied him the opportunity to be a goldsmith. It can be suggested that dedicating an entire chapter describing his father working with gold to create a trinket for a woman is indicative of a deep longing for what could have been. Laye describes in greater detail the ceremony surrounding the forging of the gold, a job that required manual adroitness, mastery of spiritual cleansing, and a knowledge

[1] See the following for more in-depth discussion of the different manifestations of childhood innocence.

Baader, Meike Sophia. *Die romantische Idee des Kindes und der Kindheit: Auf der Suche nach der verlorenen Unschuld. Neuwied*, Germany: Luchterhand, 1996.

Fass, Paula S., ed. *The Encyclopedia of Children and Childhood in History and Society*. 3 vols. London and New York: Macmillan, 2004.

Richter, Dieter. *Das fremde Kind: Zur Entstehung der Kindheitsbilder des bürgerlichen Zeitalters*. Frankfurt: S. Fischer Verlag, 1987.

Sommerville, C. John. *The Rise and Fall of Childhood.* Reissue ed. New York: Vintage, 1990.

Jenkins, Henry, ed. *The Children's Culture Reader*. New York and London: New York University Press, 1998.

of ritual. He shows how the woman, anticipating the resistance she might meet in getting the goldsmith to work on her gold in a timely manner, comes with a griot to act as a go-between. The description Laye provides of this service portrays his pride in his father's craft.

The impossibility of return to such a time is implicit in Laye's recollection of the days he spends at his mother's hometown of Tindican, a tiny village west of Kouroussa. During these visits, he explains how he is loved and pampered by his relatives, especially his grandmother. During the rice festival celebrated at the village, he describes the fun that he engages in with his friends. He tells of watching the fields for birds with his friends and how they would play around and sometimes forget to mind the birds and monkeys; how they would use their slingshots to kill the lizards and field mice. He narrates with a lot of nostalgia the time of the rice harvest and what fun they had, concluding that, 'Ah! How happy we were in those days!' (Laye 1954: 64).

The autobiographical narrative of Laye moves from childhood to his pre prepubescent years when he says that 'I am growing up.' He tells of his coming-of-age initiation ceremony of circumcision. The celebration includes a public festival that lasts several days. The entire community is interested in the ceremony and wishes the best for the candidates. Before the circumcision itself, the boys have to deal with a mystical bogeyman lion, Kondén Diara, that 'eats up little boys' (Laye 1954: 94). Filled with apprehension at the fear of the unknown, Laye is encouraged by his father not to show fear. When his father says he had also gone through the same rite, Laye asks, 'What happens to you?' (Laye 1954: 96) and his father responds:

> Nothing you need really be afraid of, nothing you cannot overcome by your own willpower. Remember: you have to control your fear; you have to control yourself. Kondén Diara will not take you away. He will roar. But he won't do more than roar.

These words give him the courage to join the other boys for a night in the forest with the lions. But when he compares this rite of passage to the circumcision that comes after, he declares that it was an ordeal. The circumcision is preceded by singing and dancing the *soli*, for a whole week. The initiates are celebrated, encouraged and showered with gifts. After the circumcision, they are kept away from their families to heal for a number of weeks, during which time the boys get to know each other better and bond. After the healing time, he joins his family again, this time as a man who deserves his own hut apart from his mother's and men's clothes. The gifting of the men's clothes and his own hut symbolises a movement away from his childhood to adulthood. It ends what the circumcision ceremony had begun; Laye is no more a child, and he expresses his sadness in leaving his childhood behind.

A trajectory of emancipated childhoods

Unlike Soyinka's *Aké* which ends before Soyinka leaves home for the secondary school, *The Dark Child* chronicles Laye's departure for the technical college in Conakry. The novel details his life at the school as well as his relationships with his father's brother and Marie, his school mate who later became his girlfriend. In spite of this difference, these two texts share some similarities in that they were both written by men who were born and lived relatively around the same time periods; and both texts celebrate a carefree childhood that contributed to making these men who they eventually became such that they can look back with nostalgia at a time long gone.

Both texts showcase caring and supportive families. Laye's father and Soyinka's manifest support, and a love, for their children through their desire to make sure that their children have the best that is available. When it is time for Laye to leave for Conakry, he goes looking for his father, and he breaks down in tears at the reality of leaving home; to reassure him, his father tells him: 'You be brave my son. My brothers will look after you. Work hard. Work as you worked here. We have made many sacrifices for you. They must not go for nothing' Laye 1954: 141). Although he wishes his son to be with him, Laye's father has long since known that his son would leave him and his traditions. He could have prevented his son from leaving, with the support of Laye's mother, but he never does, allowing the young boy to make his own path in life, 'I fear, very much, little one, that you are not often enough in my company. You are all day at school, and one day you will depart from that school for a greater one. You will leave me, little one ...' (Laye 1954: 27). This is not surprising because the narrator has been giving us hints of a future away from his father's forge. From an early age, Laye demonstrates the traits of a natural scholar, and though this is restrictive (for instance, at his grandmother's village, he must refrain from the roughest play to avoid ruining his expensive school clothes), his path appears already laid, and his family pushes him to excel; with every success taking him farther from Kouroussa. Likewise, Soyinka's father always encourages his questioning spirit, engaging him in debates that his mother even feel are beyond his years; a view his father does not share as he does not stop urging the little boy to think through things for himself.

Both fathers are also temperate eaters and generous, allowing many guests to eat at their table without sending them away. This, coupled with the fact that both children live with their parents and siblings and other non-blood relations inculcates in them the joy of community, whilst stressing that family is more than blood. Soyinka describes their household as full of a 'constantly varying assortment of children.' He claims that his mother could never say no to any of those parents or guardians who brought their wards for training or simply to be cared for by her. Wild Christian's bedroom where all these children slept, help to make them children of the house

(Soyinka 1981:79). Likewise, the Camara household is full of Laye's siblings and his father's many apprentices who live with them.

Laye and Soyinka have a healthy relationship with their parents and the other adults in their lives. They both have strong mothers who love them and try to bring them up as proper young men in the communities they live in. Notwithstanding Wild Christian's strict manner with the children in her house, there is no instance that Soyinka sensed that he is unloved and unwanted; rather, through the narrative, with the distance of time, he intimates an understanding of his mother's behaviour. One incident worth mentioning occurred when Soyinka, day-dreaming, destroyed his father's rosebushes and is saved from his father's wrath by his mother:

> I had never loved Wild Christian as I did at that moment. Responding to her husband's bellow of pain, she looked up and took in the situation. She breathed a soft 'A-ah' and her eyes filled with pity. The next moment, Essay charged across the intervening space and his fingers affixed themselves to his favourite spot, the lope of my ear, only this time, he was not only pinching it to hurt, but was trying to lift me up with it. Wild Christian moved very swiftly ... detaching my ear from his fingers and pleading with him. 'Dear, you must know. He must have been dreaming. Ah-Ah, isn't he the one who spends all his time looking after the garden? His mind wasn't there' (Soyinka 1981: 76).

Similarly, Laye narrates the love his mother has for him and he for her by dedicating the autobiography to her just as Soyinka does. In many instances in the novel, Laye describes his mother's unhappiness that her little boy is growing up and away from her; for instance, when he is given his own clothes and hut after the circumcision ceremony, his mother's sadness that he will no longer be sleeping in her hut is apparent, 'I turned toward my mother. She was smiling at me sadly' (Laye 1954: 135). Furthermore, when it was time for Laye to leave for France, her anguish knew no bounds.

Both children enjoy school and are intelligent in their studies. Laye passes his scholarship examinations, and later enrols in the Technical College in Conakry. His initial worries that the school was not grooming him for a better life are dispelled when the school is reorganised and the instruction in technical and general subjects upgraded. He passes his proficiency examinations and wins a scholarship to go for further studies in France. Soyinka is impressed by the idea of going to school as he watches his sister Tinu go everyday and so he follows her to school when he is three. He enjoys school and is often times the youngest student in his class. He too eventually wins a scholarship to the Government college.

It is interesting that although set in different geographical places in Africa, both texts indicate the importance of the rural environment in the lived experience of the narrators. Soyinka spends time in his father's village of Isara during vacations where he experiences village life. In Isara, he visits a farm, helps to kill a snake and eat it, and is given a lesson in avoiding bee stings. He also joins a hunting party of his age-group, which unfortunately is curtailed when he upsets a hornets' nest.

Laye routinely visits his mother's mother and brothers in the village of Tindican. There, he plays with his age mates, chasing birds and killing lizards. He takes part in watching the rice farm from monkeys and birds and participates in the rice harvest. Laye focuses predominantly on the joy of harvesting the rice and all the rituals that accompany this harvest.

Finally, another area of convergence is the ritual initiation into adulthood they both undergo. Whilst Laye goes through circumcision and the Kondén Diara ordeal to emerge an adult, Soyinka goes through scarification. Moolla (2012) indicates that the arc-shaped slashes on Soyinka's ankles and wrists from his paternal grandfather ritually and physically mark his transition from childhood to adulthood. According to Moolla, the scarification of the protagonist holds great spiritual, physical and emotional significance to his development.

Discussion

Laye and Soyinka, and to a large extent, their siblings enjoy a childhood that is filled with the mundane things of life; playing, going to school, being mischievous, going on adventure, having fun, learning new things and growing up. Their autobiographies serve as refreshingly different perspectives on childhoods in Africa that are mostly foregrounded in pain and despair. A cursory overview of autobiographies such as Uwem Akpan's *Say You're One of Them* (2008), Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* (2005), Ismael Beah's *A long Way Gone* (2008) and Aminatta Forna's *The Devil That Danced on the Water* (2003) showcase African childhoods steeped in misery and desolation, contributing inadvertently to a one-story narrative of African childhoods. Consequently, what this article has done is to bring to the fore other versions of African childhoods of children in Africa.

Portrayals of African childhood in African literature frequently present the child as a victim of the adult world. In reviewing Christopher Ouma's book, *Childhood in contemporary diasporic African literature: memories and futures past* (2020), Chigbo Arthur Anyaduba (2021: 601) observes that, 'Ouma's theory of childhood appears to validate a ubiquitous idea of Africa as a site of precarious childhood, a place of traumatic horror where the contemporary diasporic African writer returns for morbid inspiration.' In concluding the review, Anyaduba questions the political and ethical value readers are supposed to gain from an understanding of contemporary African literature as a literature of traumatic childhoods (602). Although the portrayal of African childhood as traumatic may not necessarily be false, what is at stake is the representation of a one-dimensional image of African childhood that obscures other realities. The questions most readers may ponder are whether all African childhoods are like these presented? Are there no other versions of African childhood? What is

the reasoning behind this one-dimensional portraiture? Chimamanda Adichie's TED on *The Danger of a Single Story* (TED Global 2009) is relevant for this discussion. In her presentation, she indicates that literature has been one of the tools that are used to present a singular story of Africa—a story of—catastrophe. Although not denying that Africa battles with corrupt governments, unemployment and poverty, she would like that the full picture is given of a continent full of positive things as well as negative things, like everywhere else in the world. The danger of the single story, she concludes, is that it creates stereotypes that tell an incomplete story. Likewise, African childhoods are as varied as there are different people and places on the continent. Literature, therefore, must help unseat stereotypes, and present a complete story of the entire picture. Consequently, this article initiates this discussion in its depiction of childhoods in *Aké* and *The Dark Child* that depart from this pervasive image of childhood as trauma in Africa by presenting African childhoods of happiness and wellbeing through the eyes of two rambunctious boys who lived, were loved and thrived in a space that was carefree and enabling for their development.

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