Beyond the Pyramid: Some Issues of Childhood in Ethiopia

Tilahun Sineshaw[*]

Introduction

The overall purpose of this article is to share some views about issues related to child development in Ethiopia with the distinguished readership of *FLAMBEAU*. These personal perspectives developed over a number of years are still in the process of metamorphosing. One of the views is epistemological. I opt for studies that situate and discuss issues in their historical and socio-cultural contexts. Slicing an issue and discussing it in isolation of socio-history, although a highly prized academic endeavor in *structure-driven* academic and research communities, is too mechanistic, frozen in time, and rejectionist. The creation of meaning in our trade calls upon the utilization of what is generally referred to as the *socio-historical approach.* I intend to write more on this in a separate article.

A second view is definitional. Research communities in Ethiopia, as perhaps elsewhere in the developing world, naively accept conceptual definitions developed in the developed world. That leads not only to a description of *situations* using *alien experiences* but also the use of unwarranted practices. Such is the case with the concepts of *childhood* and *adolescence.* While I am not advocating a *decadent ideology* and a total rejection to foreign-grown definitions, I see a need for a close scrutiny of such ideas and the cultivation of home-based conceptual definitions. A case in point is the notion of *childhood* which I unveil in this article.

The article is just a prelude to an anticipated more comprehensive work on child and adolescent development in Ethiopia. It attempts to introduce issues that will be closely examined in forthcoming studies while perhaps charting ideas that can generate academic discussions

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among the Ethiopian education research community. Readers may find issues discussed in the article disparate which they are when read at a superficial level. Nevertheless, deeper reading will demonstrate relevant interconnectedness. I have no doubt that the readers of *FLAMBEAU* are of the latter extraction.

Rationale

Knowledge that is not historically embedded and philosophically rooted lacks meaning. A construction of knowledge in behavioral and social sciences becomes thorough and meaningful when anchored in history. The philosophical foundations and implications of such knowledge are also well clarified when viewed in a historical perspective. It is out of this epistemological belief that the writer of this short article provides a brief historical and sociological sketch of the context within which the subject under consideration evolved. Three important child development issues in Ethiopia are singled out and briefly analyzed in that socio-historical configuration.

The splendid history of Ethiopia is marked by the conspicuous absence of children's voices. As the distinguished Ethiopicist, Richard Pankhurst, once wrote (1992), "early historical data in Ethiopia is so scant..." (p.3) that any academic aspiring to write on child development in Ethiopia will have to reconstruct the history of children in the country indirectly through an examination of texts that deal with folklore and other traditions. Ethiopian social psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, social historians and so on may have to engage in sustained collaborative work to unravel the mysteries of child development in Ethiopia. This, although desirable and fruitful, is quite a formidable task.

The *lives* and *conditions* of children in Ethiopia, prior to what Panchurst refers to as *The Middle Ages*, are virtually unknown. The very scanty historical documents that allude to how children have been captured as slaves (1992) during this period points to the harshness of children's lives. Both the absence of historical record on

Ethiopian children and its scantiness even when found all point to a dominant condescending sociocultural view of children widely entrenched in the society for a long time. That perspective appears to suggest that children matter less and, even when they matter, it is in relation to their socioeconomic contributions to the family.

The variety of fables and parables found in many Ethiopian vernaculars point to such a view; it is a view that does not seem to have changed significantly even today. A disregard for investing on children is certainly a total fiasco on the part of society, for the future of society depends on its willingness and commitment to invest on its children. The proliferation of foreign-based NGOs that cater to meet the needs of street children in major cities in the country today is but an indication of our own failure to value our children and hence our own future. To be able to trace how such a childhood perspective evolved and created unbearable circumstances for children calls for a huge project. That history bears significantly on the conditions of children in Ethiopia today is a truism. That this can be captured in a single article however is too much of a stretch. This article is simply an initial modest attempt to study these complex relationships.

This article focuses on a description of the socio-historical contexts children in Ethiopia grow and develop. This is done so primarily because what makes Ethiopian children *Ethiopian* is to be sought in these contexts and else. Children are embodiments of our past, present, and future. All our past successes and failures, our present commitments and opportunities as well as our future aspirations, hopes, and frustrations are all embedded in and revealed through our children. In a way, we all have two childhoods, one of our own and that of our parents. Today's children can give us the opportunity to go back and revisit our past, for, who they are and how they come to be are intricately interwoven in a web of inter-generational stories. A study of child development in Ethiopia therefore should start from a description of the historical and sociological contexts within which development takes place.

The Socio-Historical Context

Ethiopia, a country in what is now commonly referred to as the Horn of Africa, is home to over 60 million people. Some historians contend that Ethiopian history spans for well over three millennia (see, for example, Pankhurst, 1955), while others (example, Markakis, 1974) consider the claim of 'a prior to the first century Ethiopian history' as "mythical" (p.13); yet others (example, Marcus, 1994) even go farther than the former and construct historical narratives that link the beginning of Ethiopian history to the findings of paleoanthropolgists, viz., *Australopithecus afarensis* in present day Afar region and *Australopithecus africanus* in present day SNNP region.

The more recent archeological find about *Homo erectus* authored by Asfaw et al and reported by Clarke (2002), while posing a very credible challenge to the so-called *species-splitters* perspective yet again reconfirms Ethiopia's claim as the birth place of humankind. Marcus' attempt to view Ethiopian history in the light of such finds is perhaps bolstered and emboldened once again. Interestingly, these academic debates have their parallels in politics. The much-heated and sensational political debates of the early to mid-1990s about the length of Ethiopia's history and how it should be viewed have been well summed up by the cogently argued work of an Ethiopian social thinker, Teshale Tibebu (1995).

Despite the controversy, though, this long history has created social conditions that have sustained a unique civilization for centuries. What is commonly known as the *Axumite Civilization* has been part of this long history. Distinct art forms, music, literature, and philosophy abounded and flourished in that civilization.

Ethiopia is the only African country that maintained its independence in the face of the late 19th century colonial assault on Africa. The five-year Italian colonial interlude, although brutal in its occupation, is understood as a period of a war of resistance. The historical sacrifices Ethiopians had made to preserve their independence has earned the

country the label, *symbol of resistance,* for all colonized peoples in Africa and elsewhere (Zewde, 1991).

Ethiopia is home to three of the greatest religions of the world, namely, Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. Well over 90 percent of the inhabitants of Ethiopia are followers of one or the other of these religions while the rest believe in African traditional religions. The Ethiopian Tewahedo Orthodox Church is often times considered to be the mainstay of Axumite civilization (Pankhurst, 1976) for socio-cultural reasons the discussion of which is beyond the scope of this paper.

Linguists and anthropologists estimate that well over 60 languages with their dialectical variations are spoken in Ethiopia. The variety of languages spoken and the diversity of ethno-linguistic communities residing in Ethiopia are shared attributes with most of Sub-Saharan Africa. In this sense, Ethiopia is just a microcosm of Sub-Saharan Africa. What makes Ethiopia unique in the socio-cultural sense is its possession of an indigenous orthography. The *Giiz* script is believed to be an *Ethiopian invention.* What Teshale Tibebu (1996) aptly calls the *Giiz Civilization* has been recorded and preserved in the form of Giiz manuscripts. It is against these historical and sociological contexts that the conditions of children in contemporary Ethiopia need to be described and assessed.

A Perspective and an Approach

A cross-cultural comparison of any aspect of child development certainly calls for an approach that attempts to situate development within a matrix of social history. This writer recognizes the historicity and connectedness of child development to childhood ecology. Put another way, it is the social, cultural, and historical systems within the ecology that define who children are and what they would become. The main rationale for the brief account of Ethiopian history and society given above resides in the relevance and recognition of the

fact that children grow and develop in a matrix of sociologically and historically defined and intertwined environs.

In studying interconnections of the type identified above, developmenatlists have utilized what anthropologists have dubbed the *emic* or the *etic* approaches (Bogdan and Biklen, 1991). Those who opt for the former tend to describe child development from a culture-specific perspective while those who choose the latter emphasize universal child development issues.

This paper rejects the above dichotomous and mechanistic approach to the study of child development. Rather, it incorporates both approaches in its cross-cultural description of the issue at hand. In other words, the particular and the universal are viewed as intertwined. The study of any aspect of childhood rises to a scientific plane only when children are studied in a culturally and historically defined terrain in ways that transcend the setting.

What Is Beyond the Pyramid?

Ethiopia is one of the 25 most populous nations of the world. It is the third most populous country in Africa following Nigeria and Egypt. Of Ethiopia's 60 million people, some 56 percent are estimated to be children and youth below 20 years of age. And, of the latter, 85 percent are children and youth under the age of 15 years (Hailemariam, 1996).

An analysis of such demographic trends and the United Nations human development reports (see the 2001 Human Development Report, for example), reveal that the bulk of the population in Ethiopia, as is in the rest of the developing world, consists of children and adolescents. The annual population growth rate in Ethiopia is around 3.1 percent which makes it one of the highest. This is a shared attribute with most underdeveloped countries. What implication(s) does this rapid population growth have on child development?

The frightening population growth observed and the less-than satisfactory national economic performance have compounded the problems of child-care and welfare. Socioeconomic conditions that are characterized by poverty, illiteracy, disease and other social ills are likely to create social and familial situations that burden children. As a consequence of such conditions a significant number of children have joined the ranks of street dwellers.

Children are experiencing all forms of maltreatment including homelessness, starvation, neglect as well as physical and sexual abuse. The recent proliferation of foreign-based NGOs that cater to help street children attests to this increase. A most recent publication in *Scientific American* reveals that such maltreatments, when they occur early in the life of children, lead to long lasting negative effects on brain development and function.

If we were to depict the demographic distribution of age categories in Ethiopia using a graphic technique demographers call *population pyramid,* we would find very few people at the top of the pyramid with the highest concentration increasing as we move down the pyramid.

According to the 1999 U. S. Bureau of the Census, the percentage of Ethiopians under age 15 is 46.3 given a total population of 60 million 967 thousand. The same report reveals that only 2.8 of the nearly 61 million people are over the age of 64. Taking the two population categories into account the statistics would yield an approximate 51: 49 percent *dependency ratio.* Note that this ratio is arrived at through a comparison of the 0-14 and over 64 age categories to that of the 15-64 age group (Berger 2001). This trend is again shared by most underdeveloped nations. It might also be interesting to note that a similar graphic representation characterized the industrial world including the United States in 1900 (Administration on Aging, 1997).

The foregoing demographic descriptions sharply contrast with that of the trend observed in contemporary industrial countries. As noted above the shape of the population pyramid in 1900 U.S.A. was pretty

much the same as the one found in contemporary Ethiopia and much
of the underdeveloped world. That is to say, at the turn of the last
century, there were a lot more people under the age of 20 than there
were people over 60. As a consequence of such a distribution, the
figure resembles a pyramid.

What developmental psychologists now call the *secular trend* and a
zero or *negative population growth rate* are now in the process of fast
changing the shape of the population pyramid in industrial countries.
For example, in contrast to the statistics reported earlier on Ethiopia,
of the total 274 million 943 thousand, the percentage under 15 years
of age is 21.4 while the percentage over 64 is 12.6. The approximate
dependency ratio is put at 66: 34 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1999).
Recall that Ethiopia's was 46.3, 2.8, and 51:49 for those under 15,
over 64, and the dependency ratio, respectively. It is now projected
that, in the United States, by 2030 the 1900 pyramid will have turned
upside down indicating a dramatic shift (Berger, 2001).

While the statistics shown in the preceding paragraph point to the
conciseness of the population pyramid notion in the description of the
age structure of the population, a closer examination of the
dependency ratio in Ethiopia reveals a hidden fact related to child
labor. As will be discussed in subsequent paragraphs, the vast
majority of Ethiopian children live in rural settings in scattered peasant
households. If childhood was to be defined by simple age-related
attributes such as found in the industrial world, infancy through the
school years (birth to12 years of age), the issue of dependency
becomes problematic.

This definition subscribes to the notion that children do not contribute
to society but instead need to be taken care of. In Ethiopia, children
begin to contribute to the socioeconomic life of the household and,
hence society, much earlier. A typical four-or-five year-old Ethiopian
child is indeed a productive contributor of household income. Be it
through tending cattle, fetching water, or working on the farm fields
along with parents, older siblings and others, he or she has already

become part of the 'productive workforce! Of course, as the individual grows older both the quantity and quality of labor invested in the household's socioeconomic life sharply increases.

It is therefore not unreasonable to challenge the industrial world's definition of childhood. When looked at from the perspective of developmental functions, childhood in Ethiopia and perhaps in most underdeveloped countries refers to *only* the first three or four years of life! Without transition, children begin to assume an important function of adults. The *dependency ratio* that was discussed earlier (51:49) therefore hides this fact since it was calculated on the basis of a wrong assumption. It assumed that children under age 14 are dependents when in fact dependency lasts probably about 4 years! This line of argument may also apply to children in the United States before the child labor laws were passed in the mid-1920s. Ethiopian children's predicament does not end here. A lot more hostile socioeconomic factors leave their adverse marks on their development. The following few paragraphs discuss very few of them in very general terms.

Illiteracy, War, and Famine

Ethiopia is fundamentally a rural society with only 11.5 percent of the population residing in urban centers while the remaining 88.5 percent lives in the countryside that lacks the basic infrastructure and social services such as roads, electricity, running water, schools, and health care centers (Hailemariam, 1997).

Ethiopia has been dubbed as the *land of the scribe and the thumb print* (Sineshaw, 1997) to underline the fact that although an indigenous literate culture has been in existence for centuries, illiteracy is still entrenched. A liberal estimate puts the literacy rate at around 10 percent (Sineshaw, 1994) although a suspicious official statistics claimed 27 percent (Hailemariam, 1997; see Sineshaw, 1991 on the problems of literacy statistics). The literacy rate in rural Ethiopia is even dismal given the disproportionate number of literates

residing in urban centers. The vast majority of Ethiopia's children being rural dwellers are therefore born into an illiterate milieu. Pankhurst's (1992) description of the very low level of literacy among children during *The Middle Ages* has changed very little when assessed in lieu of the rural-urban and poor-rich dichotomies.

The problems of Ethiopian children are of course compounded by the fact that Ethiopia's recent past (the last 40 years or so) has been marauded by wars conducted by fighters of all hues and persuasions. The burden of all the different wars has always fallen on children and adolescents between ages 10-20. Not only were children the main fighters in all the insurgent movements that fought successive Ethiopian governments, but also major targets of government conscriptions. Children grew up in war, making war, and killed through war. The *life* and *condition* of Ethiopian children in the past 30 years or so has been like what one writer characterized contemporary Afghanis: The only time they are at peace is when they are at war (Giradet, 2001).

The plight of children in Ethiopia during the past four decades or so has also been worsened by the frequent massive famines the world witnessed in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s that left millions dead, severely bruised, and handicapped. Subsequent droughts as well as man-made calamities left the most vulnerable, that is, children famine-prone. The sight of skeleton-like kids trying to feed on dying mothers reverberates in our recent collective memories. Infants and young children that were lucky enough to physically survive the adversities of such famines are probably left with intellectual capabilities a lot less than their potentials! What is to become of the country that has lost a significant portion of its young people's potential cognitive capacities?!

The life and situation of children in Ethiopia tells a story about the degree of commitment adult society has made in allocating resources to the welfare of children. Ethiopia's leaders should realize that investing children's welfare today is not only a serious investment in

the country's future, but also in all of humanity. The sooner they realize this the better!

The Author

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