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Is ‘child placement’ trafficking?

Questioning the validity of an accepted discourse

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‘All those who have been placed have been trafficked.’

Beninese NGO employee, 2007.¹

The term ‘child placement’ commonly refers to the intra-kin relocation of children that has long formed a normal part of child rearing and socialization in much of Africa. In the academic literature, it is often termed ‘fosterage’, and it involves parents sending their children to live and work within other households for their and their community’s wellbeing and development (Alber 2003; Goody 1982; Guillaume *et al.* 1997; Isiugo-Abanihe 1985). Within the discursive-institutional space occupied by organizations working on child protection, however, child placement is said to have become so corrupted by the forces of modernity that it is often viewed as the progenitor of child trafficking. In Benin, the narrative of ‘placement corrupted’ has become so well established that the country’s anti-trafficking law is in fact a law regulating the movement (including placement) of minors, and has resulted in the de facto criminalization of the intra-kin mobility that constitutes placement (Howard 2008; Loi no. 2006-04). In what follows, I offer a brief overview of this situation, unravelling the origins of the discourse from which the anti-placement law and its attendant policies have emerged, and questioning its validity.

Contexts

Child² trafficking began to emerge as a ‘problem issue’ in Benin at the beginning of the last decade (Alber 2011). Child labour had long been a focus of international and national attention in the country, but child trafficking arrived to displace it as the central preoccupation around this time, with the UN’s adoption in 2000 of the Trafficking Protocol, and the ‘*Etireno* affair’ in West Africa the following year. The *Etireno* was a Nigerian trawler used by a gang of people smugglers to illegally transport Beninese and other West African children to Gabon for the purposes of work. After a night raid, the Gabonese authorities uncovered the smuggling ring and refused to let the *Etireno* dock, ordering the captain to return his passengers to Benin. The captain’s attempt to get the ship back to his native Cameroon in order to evade prosecution set off a diplomatic crisis, as no country would allow the ship to dock, and its passengers remaining stranded at sea in difficult conditions for several days. As the world’s media descended on the Gulf of Guinea, a flurry of high-profile reports on ‘the slave ship’ and ‘a modern-day slave trade’³ ensued, and Benin began to be viewed as the epicentre of an international trade in children.

Shamed by this designation and pressured (or attracted) by the influx of money and expertise from the international child-protection community, Benin’s government quickly ratified the Trafficking Protocol and, together with its partners, set about establishing a policy to tackle the country’s ‘endemic’ child-trafficking problem. Here as elsewhere, ‘trafficking’ was defined as ‘movement plus exploitation’, with ‘exploitation’ taken to mean any economically productive activity deemed unacceptable for a child, and from which a third party derives a profit (as per the anti-child labour framework of the International Labour Organization (ILO)).

Despite the two components of the trafficking definition, the preventive emphasis of legal and policy efforts in Benin was placed firmly on the ‘movement’ side of the equation. Local ‘committees’ were established to dissuade families from ‘placing’ their children or allowing them to move, border controls were extended, national information campaigns championed ‘staying at home’, and Benin’s anti-trafficking law established that children could not legally be displaced within the borders of the country unless accompanied by either a parent or guardian or with the (expensive) consent of a local government official. That this rule would prove problematic quickly became apparent, and it will be the purpose of this article to address one of the reasons why.

Methods and data collection

My research on this issue involved 14 months of multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork, during which I collected hundreds of institutional documents, interviewed more than 300 people, and observed and worked with individuals and institutions at every level of the anti-trafficking policy chain. At the institutional level, I focused on those bodies that are at the heart of producing and sustaining the anti-trafficking discourse, and at the forefront of forming and implementing anti-trafficking policy, both in Benin’s largest city, Cotonou, and throughout the country. These bodies include UNICEF and the ILO, the US State Department and Department of Labor, the Danish International Development Agency, the EU and France, the Beninese Family and Justice Ministries, and a collection of national and international child-focused NGOs operating in Benin.

At the community level, I divided my work into two phases. First, I interned at a shelter for ‘rescued children’ run by an international NGO, and spent several months working with and interviewing young people identified as victims of trafficking. Second, I chose four case-study villages from two communes in the *Zou département* that have been institutionally identified as a ‘hub’ of child labour, trafficking and exploitation in the country. In the villages, I conducted open-ended individual and group interviews that focused on how people see their life-worlds, how they experience and view (hazardous) child work and movement, how they understand childhood and the transition to adulthood, and what they have to say about current anti-trafficking interventions.

I consistently coded, analyzed and anonymized my interview data, and discussed my interpretations with informed colleagues and interviewees. I also used critical discourse analysis techniques to examine the content and development of the anti-trafficking discourse in its textual form.

Placement as trafficking

Within the community of actors working on trafficking in Benin, the notion that trafficking is an outgrowth of the once-positive tradition of child placement (itself corrupted under the influence of modernity and monetization) has come to be accepted near universally. In published and unpublished material of all kinds, and in my interviews with state, international and civil-society actors, questions about the origins and causes of child trafficking and the reasons for its prominence are met with an almost rote-like narrative about the 'bastardization' of *vidomègon*, the Fon⁴ term for child placement. An indication of both the stability and the reach of this narrative can be gleaned from the field notes and official reports quoted below:

After meeting the journalists, the day started off with a general, introductory interview with Nourredine.⁵ Really interesting. He talked about the work the NGO does and gave a general background to the trafficking situation in Benin. He spoke of the links between placement and trafficking, I think frequently making the conceptual ellipsis from one to the other, unsurprisingly I suppose given the huge overlap (definitional) between the two practices. He spoke of the change in the motives for child placement. What was once a mark of solidarity between people(s), expanding and strengthening interpersonal networks, has now become capitalized and is very much influenced/defined by economic incentive/opportunity. He also said there is a difference now in the nature of the people with whom children are placed – whereas before it might have been a relative, friend or clansman, now it can be anyone, either tenuously linked to the family or often not at all. This is crucial because it embodies the changing dimensions of both social structure/networks, including the breakdown of face-to-face ties, and the commercialization of the very act of placement itself, which leads to abuse.

Field notes, 27 July 2007

'Child placement' has deviated from its original function of communal solidarity, underpins child labour and fans the flames of domestic and international trafficking.

Extract from 'National plan of action', MFE & UNICEF 2008: 18

The phenomenon of child placement, once considered a means for reinforcing inter-familial links and social cohesion, has undergone a number of contemporary transformations. Over the course of recent decades, the combined effect of moral decline, the negligence of certain parents, the impoverishment of certain regions...has dealt a death blow to the cultural practice of placing one's child with others in the hope of contributing to his education or socialization. This ancient tradition is now a bedrock of irregular and uncontrolled youth mobility.

Extract from a study of the effectiveness of anti-trafficking strategies in Benin, UNICEF Benin & MFPSS 2004: 1

My interviews with policymakers in Benin suggest that it is this assumption that child placement leads inexorably to exploitation which underpins the problematic anti-movement approach that dominates anti-trafficking policy in the country. For example, in my discussions with a senior government representative who I will call Salama, my interlocutor acknowledged that 'it's true that we limit child movement and child placement, but that's because when children move they normally end up in situations of abuse' (interview, 11 March 2010). Salama's understanding was echoed by Sandra, a senior Beninese figure working with international NGOs and donor agencies in Cotonou. When asked whether the country's anti-trafficking strategy was almost explicitly anti-migratory, she responded that it was, since 'the reality is that people lie [about how young people will be treated when they leave home for work] and children are then often abused' (interview, September 2007). Perhaps even more emphatically, when I asked Deg, a senior state employee in the Family Ministry, how it could be practicable for a poor, illiterate villager to get together the money and documents necessary to legally place his child, this was the response I received: 'That's the point. It isn't practicable. The goal is to ban placement. You can't tell the difference between placement and trafficking anyway, so we need to ban it all' (interview, 10 March 2010).

Roots of a discourse

Having lived, worked and researched in Benin during three separate periods since 2005, I find Deg's assumption (and the policy approach that appears to issue from it) deeply troubling. To begin with, the assumption is undermined by the lack of any empirical research to support it, while there is widespread anecdotal data that brings it into question, and a plethora of relevant secondary research challenging the doxa on which it is based.

Firstly, it is important to highlight that, to my knowledge, *no empirical studies* exist to support the claim that the forces of modernity have transformed the circulation of children in Benin from what was once a predominantly benign phenomenon into one that is now a bedrock of generalized abuse. Although officials high and low can and do recite this narrative by heart, when I questioned such officials as to how and why people were so certain that this was the case, the responses I received ranged from blank stares, to stutters, to simple assertions that 'we just know'. Two instances in particular stand out.

The first is an interview I conducted with Didi, a very senior Beninese civil servant who occupies a position at the heart of the Family Ministry, and who is thus a central figure in Benin's anti-trafficking pantheon. In response to my question about why trafficking had exploded as an issue in Benin a decade ago, he opined that 'it all comes back to the monetization of social relations'. 'In the beginning', he continued, 'placement was an ancient act of solidarity. Money wasn't involved. Sometimes children went with people to whom they were not related, but they were well treated. Monetization made kids become a way of earning money.' 'Do any studies exist which demonstrate or prove the supposed link between monetization and exploitation?', I asked. 'I don't think so', he said. 'At least I don't know of any' (interview, 3 April 2010).

In similar fashion, in March last year, as a participant in a national child-protection workshop convened by a major international NGO to discuss the state of anti-trafficking work in the country, I had the opportunity to sit for three days among what was effectively the entire Benin-based child-protection community responsible for national anti-trafficking policy. During one of the early sessions, the 'history and context of trafficking' in Benin and West Africa was presented by a Senegalese academic, who was also a senior figure in one of the agencies represented at the workshop. When the floor was opened to questions, I asked the presenter and my fellow participants whether anyone was aware of the existence of a single study that demonstrated a link between the monetization of child placement and an increase in the level of abuse that placed

children experienced, since this was apparently the base assumption on which we were working. My question was greeted with total silence. Not a single voice stirred, and eventually, somewhat sheepishly, the session chair looked up and conceded that there was no such study, and that this was problematic.

Such encounters naturally prompt the question – where did this belief that placement equals trafficking come from? The exchanges I had with two further institutional figures are illustrative here. Below is an extract from the notes I made after interviewing Moussa, a senior civil servant in the Family Ministry:

I asked whether the anti-movement components of the anti-trafficking law made it easier for corruption to flourish. At this point he went off on a huge discursive tangent. He opened up a document that he'd been working on entitled 'History repeating itself', in which he makes the socio-cultural link between the slavery of the past and child trafficking today. 'The weight of tradition is really very heavy', he began. 'Child trafficking has deep, deep roots in Beninese society', he continued. 'In Africa, the child belongs to the community, is a gift, a richness, and this communal feeling is what underlies the fact that the child can comfortably go and live with any member of the extended family, if it is believed that this will help the child on the path of life. We call this practice *confiage*, or *placement*, in French', he added. 'However, at a certain point in time, this hitherto positive tradition deviated from its core purpose, such that now it has become monetized, and leads to abuse. Kids are not sent to school, they are transactionalized.' I asked him where he got his information. *He said it was all based on the UNICEF studies.*

Field notes, 8 March 2010

Similarly illustrative was my discussion with Marti, a frank and critical local-government official responsible for child protection in one of the two *départements* in which my case-study villages are located. When talking over the process of policy formation, Marti explained to me how things were ideally supposed to work. Before enacting policy, he said, 'we start off by taking stock and understanding the phenomenon', he began. 'We investigate, we do studies, and we come to the realization that what was once a mark of mutual support and solidarity has recently transformed itself into trafficking.' Then he smiled – 'it doesn't always work like this, of course' – before conceding that, in a recent instance, they had relied on studies from the UNICEF library in Cotonou (interview, 23 March 2010).

Spurred by these interviews, I visited the UNICEF library in Cotonou, aware that, as the only child-focused documentary centre in Benin, it occupied a place of singular importance in this field. Having searched the library extensively for any studies that might have some relevance to the topic at hand, I made two discoveries. The first was that, as I had suspected, no work existed that empirically investigated the possible correlation between the changing nature of placement and the changing nature of children's experiences of that placement. The second was that, without exception, all the major studies the library held that related to child trafficking, child movement or child placement cited in their literature reviews two of the earliest relevant studies in the library's archives – UNICEF's 1998 'Study prepared for the sub-regional workshop on trafficking, child domestic workers, particularly girls in domestic service, in the West and Central Africa region' and a 1994 study on 'Vidomègon children, unaccompanied/estranged children, abandoned children in Benin',⁶ by UNICEF and the precursor to the Family Ministry. While the very titles of these documents make clear an assumed equivalence between child placement or domestic service and trafficking/other forms of imposed suffering, a brief analysis of the texts themselves further shows that the studies were conducted on the assumption that placement and domestic service are exploitative and problematic *in and of themselves*. At various points throughout the texts, placement or child domestic service are described as 'problems', while at one point we are told of 'the dangers *inherent* in these situations' (Veil 1998: iii, emphasis added). Moreover, readers are informed that 'the existence of an economic motive on the part of one or both parties [to the child's placement] is enough to qualify it as trafficking', and that 'payment for child domestic workers...is a salient indicator of the exploitative nature of the situation' (Veil 1998: iii-vi). At no point do we encounter any empirical research examining the experience of actual children living in these situations, still less any comparison between their situations and those of their forbears in the supposedly pre-monetary past.

The point being made here is *not* that the practice of child circulation or child placement has not changed at all, nor even that the advent of modernity (or, more appropriately, the deepening of capitalist relations) has had no effect on the way in which children move or on the experiences they have when they do move. Indeed, the historical-sociological data discussed below demonstrates clearly that migration and labour relations *have* evolved under the influence of capitalist entrenchment. My point is simply that, despite the doxic certainty within which the narrative of 'tradition corrupted' is cloaked, no empirical grounding for this narrative actually exists. Rather, what we appear to have is a largely unquestioned belief that the monetization of child domestic work and movement *automatically* transforms something unproblematic into something that is *essentially* exploitative (and thus qualifies as trafficking).

Empirical and theoretical challenges

This section will argue that the monetization assumption itself rests on two further assumptions that simply do not stand up to historical or contemporary academic scrutiny. These are 1), that household work, when non-remunerated, is not economically productive, and thus cannot be classed as exploitation (since that which is economically productive is exploitative) and 2), that there is a correlation between child work outside the kinship network and mistreatment.

Starting with point 1, then: household and feminist economists have long argued that remuneration and economic productivity are not coterminous. Beginning with the pioneering work of Ester Boserup in 1970, researchers have demonstrated across a range of contexts that a household's productivity, which is often represented in the wage earned by adults engaged in formal employment, is in fact a collective endeavour, since the ability of those adults to access waged employment is contingent upon the unremunerated behind-the-scenes labour of other household members. In Benin, this was made abundantly clear to me at various stages of my fieldwork. In the case of the family with whom I lived in Cotonou in 2005, 2007 and 2010, for example, the mother and father were able to access waged employment outside the family home precisely because domestic tasks were undertaken by their children or the children of rural relatives who lived and worked in their urban household.

Such arrangements are in no way uncommon, and the historical sociology of Mélanie Jacquemin in Côte d'Ivoire has demonstrated that they in fact represent more of a widespread norm now that capitalism has deepened in the region. Drawing on her work with young maids, placed children and child workers active in the domestic and informal economy in urban Abidjan, Jacquemin has argued that, while the demographic over-representation of adolescent girls in the city which correlates with high levels of migrant child labour dates from at least the 1950s, the decline in real household income that has accompanied economic change in Africa since the 1970s has seen a rapid rise in the employment of

adolescent girls within the urban economy in that period. As more and more women have been drawn into the informal but remunerated sector outside the home, greater demand has emerged for gendered child labour, both to fill the gap that women leave inside the home *and* to support their gender-conditioned economic activities outside it. A classic example of this can be seen in the small-scale catering sector that dominates any sub-Saharan cityscape. ‘Behind the visible tradeswomen’, Jacquemin explains, there lies a vast ‘workforce made up of little and adolescent migrant girls from the rural kinship’, who either work in the home, in the kitchen or as servants at the tables (Jacquemin 2000; 2006; 2008).

To observe that this is the contemporary reality is not to suggest that the economic functions of children’s work and circulation are new and related entirely to capitalist development, however. Historical studies of the processes of child fosterage demonstrate clearly that the practice has *always* had economically productive underpinnings, despite the ‘social’ language with which it was encompassed, and irrespective of the presence or otherwise of cash. Guillaume *et al.* (1997), for example, have argued that unremunerated, intra-kin fosterage has long represented a way of evening the spread of children across the extended family, sharing not only the burden of their care, but also the fruits of their labour. Alain Adihou explains that, in Benin, the ‘ancient’ practice of *vidomègon* that is supposed to have metamorphosed into trafficking by virtue of its association with cash, was historically often based on an analysis of intra-kin household labour shortages (Adihou & ASI 1998: 4), and thus frequently saw boys and girls move between households according to where their contribution was most needed. Such a perspective is confirmed by the historical ethnographies of Fon society conducted by Mercier (1963) and Argyle (1966).

The claim that monetization is coextensive with economic (as opposed to benevolent, charitable, or ‘social’) motivations, and the further claim that such motivations equate to exploitation, would seem to represent an ahistorical and acontextual romanticization of both the contemporary and historical character of the domestic economy. The same is arguably true of the second assumption that is to be challenged here – that there is a correlation between child work outside the kinship network and mistreatment. Simply put, while it is true that no large-scale empirical study exists to either definitively prove or disprove this assumption, an abundance of anecdotal data suggests that it is likely to be so reductive as to be false.

In my own research, particularly during the early phases of my fieldwork when I interned in the shelter for rescued children, I certainly did come across many young people who had experienced terrible treatment at the hands of their nominal ‘employers’ after having been placed. Jacquemin’s studies too are full of examples of suffering on the part of migrant child workers. However, in neither my nor Jacquemin’s studies were the abused solely (or even predominantly) to be found among those who had been sent outside the family for monetized work. Indeed, the reverse was often the case.

Discussing this issue with friends in a village close to the Togolese border, I was told frankly by Red, a successful state employee in Cotonou, that, despite the rhetoric about the role of extended family and kinship ties in these processes, people – himself included – were much more likely to put other people’s children ‘to work’ than they were their own, including if those other children were the children of relatives. In the same conversation, Giles told me that his father had placed him as a child with his aunt in order for him to learn a farm-related trade, but his aunt had forced him to sell doughnuts on a street stall, and beat him every time he made a mistake with the money (interviews, 19 August 2007). Such stories are in no way uncommon, nor, indeed, is it hard to find examples of children who run away from their own parents, either because of mistreatment or frustrated personal goals.

By contrast, there are myriad examples of children enjoying excellent relations with their employers/the people with whom they are placed, sometimes preferring their non-kin guardians to their parents or extended family. For example, Jess told me that she loved the lady she was placed with so much that her only hope was to go back to live with her, rather than being at ‘home’ (interview, 9 August 2007). Similarly, Mary told me that, although when she was placed she sometimes had to work hard even if she did not want to, her placement taught her useful skills and how to be independent. ‘It formed me’, she concluded (interview, 31 August 2007).

Conclusion

I have attempted to argue that the widespread assumption that child placement either equates to, or has evolved into, trafficking, rests on the shakiest of empirical ground. Indeed, the assumption arguably depends on a near-fetishization of money, in which the mere presence of money in the exchange of a child’s labour power makes that exchange economic, exploitative and likely to be abusive, where previously it would not have been so. This is not to suggest that much child placement and a good deal of child work is not exploitative or abusive – it most certainly is, and there may be reason to believe that the changing nature of social relations under conditions of capitalism contribute to this reality. Nevertheless, it is plainly simplistic to argue that money corrupts so universally, and thus that monetized child movement must be suppressed as an incidence of ‘trafficking’. More admission of complexity is needed within this discursive space, and policy changes are required accordingly.



1. Throughout my research, I have anonymized all data pertaining to identifiable individuals and places. I attempt not to refer directly to institutions either, other than in cases where this is unavoidable. Unless otherwise stated, translations are my own.

2. Though I consider ‘children’ and ‘childhood’ to be situational concepts that vary according to time, place, culture and social structure, among other things, the institutional literature and policy I am examining take ‘children’ to be those under the biological age of 18, and ‘childhood’ thus to be the period before that age is reached. Since my research reflects on the appropriateness of these institutional understandings and policies, I have decided to engage with them on their own terms, and have therefore used the same criteria throughout this study. As the study focuses almost entirely on adolescent migrants, the word ‘child’ is used interchangeably with ‘youth’, unless otherwise specified.

3. *Independent*, 18 April 2001.

4. Fon is the dominant language in southern Benin.

5. ‘Nourredine’ is a highly influential local NGO actor who collaborates closely with the government on its anti-trafficking policy. He is also the author of two foundational studies of trafficking and its link to placement in Benin.

6. The original title is ‘Les enfants vidomègons, les enfants en rupture, les enfants abandonés au Bénin’. This is of interest because the phrase ‘*en rupture*’ encompasses parent-child separation in general and has highly negative connotations.

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