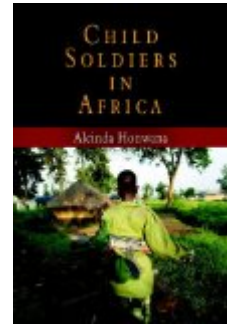


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Alcinda Honwana. *Child Soldiers in Africa.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005. 216 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-3911-9; \$22.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8122-1987-6.

Reviewed by Jessica Schafer (School of Public and International Affairs, University of Ottawa)
Published on H-SAfrica (October, 2007)



From Victims to Tactical Agents

This book addresses a research topic and a policy target group that have both gained increasing attention over the past decade and a half (roughly since the recent wave of intra-state conflicts after the end of the Cold War in the late 1980s). The author, currently a professor in international development at the Open University in the United Kingdom, researched the topic over approximately the same period for both academic and policy purposes. The material she gathered on child soldiers in Mozambique came from two main research projects, a 1995 evaluation of a Children and War project that united unaccompanied children with families or communities, and a 1999 study of girls' and women's experiences of war and postwar reintegration within the context of a non-governmental organization working with war-affected youths. Her work in Angola was conducted as part of a study for the Christian Children's Fund (CCF) on the role of traditional healing practices in the social reintegration of war-affected children, which she carried out in collaboration with workers within the CCF. Research was conducted during the brief interval of peace in Angola from 1997 to 1998.

The context for the research is relevant to understanding the book, as it clearly attempts to straddle the academic and policy worlds in the questions it addresses as well as the approach taken to research. Interest in this topic is perhaps strongest in the policy world of humanitarian and international development organizations, but Honwana's institutional affiliations have primarily been with academic institutions. Development organizations have begun to awaken to the idea that understanding

local sociocultural contexts is a necessary basis for designing programs to assist reintegration for child soldiers and other war-affected people. Hence, the guiding objective of Honwana's study in Angola, for example, was to learn about and document traditional healing in order to help CCF develop culturally appropriate intervention programs.

The danger of research under the auspices of an interventionist organization is that interactions with informants may be structured around their perceptions of the organization. This may provide incentives for a particular packaging of responses during interviews. Honwana is aware of these issues and discusses the ways she attempted to overcome the potential bias of agency-related research. Her return visits over the course of many years and her attempts to interview a range of informants with diverse interests and social positions were the strategies she used in Mozambique. In Angola, she turned the agency connection into an asset for building trust, through the long-standing relationships between her research collaborators and the informants. To a certain extent, these strategies appear to have been successful, as many of the interview excerpts in the book illustrate a reasonable depth of description. The policy-guided approach poses other problems for the research, however.

The book's introduction provides a brief overview of the contemporary context in which child soldiers have risen to public consciousness, though Honwana is careful to state here and later in the book that child soldiers are not a new phenomenon. There is a welcome men-

tion of the involvement of children in violence against other children and adults in Western society (Columbine in the United States and the James Bulger killing in the United Kingdom), so often forgotten by commentators intent on exoticizing violence in non-Western contexts. Nonetheless, the main focus of the background discussion is on child soldiers in contexts of societal breakdown as a result of the rise in post-Cold War civil conflicts in the non-Western world. The introduction also provides a brief glimpse of Honwana's theoretical approach, which is framed around the idea of child soldiers as occupying an interstitial social position, not fitting into any of the traditional dichotomies of child/adult, perpetrator/victim, vulnerable/powerful, etc. Hence, she argues that "efforts to theorize the place occupied by child soldiers are not entirely satisfactory, for this position is inherently unstable, without sanctioned cultural definition, embodying a societal contradiction, and entirely embedded in conflict" (p. 3).

Chapter 1 provides a brief, schematic account of the wars in Mozambique and Angola in which child soldiers came to play prominent roles on the military and ideological battlefield. In this chapter it becomes clear that the empirical material upon which the book draws is entirely from Mozambique and Angola—a problem I will return to below. In Mozambique, material is drawn from her study in Maputo city neighborhoods and provincial towns, an island off the Maputo province coast (Josina Machel), and shorter forays into Gaza, Nampula, and Sofala provinces. In Angola, it is drawn from Luanda, Moxico, Biã, Huambo, Malange, and Uige provinces.

Chapter 2 provides a bit more detail to support Honwana's argument that children have been involved in warfare throughout history, but that the scale of the problem has increased and its nature changed significantly in the contemporary period, with the transformation of warfare. Honwana argues that the breakdown of societal structures and extreme poverty are the key factors making children's contemporary participation in conflict particularly problematic and distinct from the past. She briefly acknowledges that there are debates over the validity of the idea of "new wars," and critiques of neat distinctions between the type of soldier-civilian interactions of past versus present wars, but dismisses these fairly lightly with the statement that "while scholars disagree about the degree of such differences, they generally accept the idea that modern civil wars present particular characteristics, or have developed features of traditional wars to an extreme rarely seen in the past" (p. 33).

Honwana reviews the international legal instruments addressing child soldiers and civilians in war since the first Geneva Convention of 1949, and describes some of the tussles over the detail of these laws, conventions, and protocols. Yet she notes that it seems vaguely ridiculous to be debating details such as whether fifteen or eighteen years should be the cut-off age for military participation, when the broader problem is that none of the most basic existing rules against the treatment of children in warfare is properly implemented and enforced as of yet. She argues that the "central challenge is how to make international humanitarian law understood, recognized, and enforced in places where children are recruited into armed conflicts on a daily basis" (p. 39). The key to addressing this challenge is the harmonization of local and global understandings of the rights of children, and active involvement of local communities in their implementation. At the same time, and potentially contradictorily, Honwana argues that foreign opposition to the participation of children in war may be based on a "false universalization of the position of children and youth in their own societies" (p. 40).

This argument leads into her discussion of childhood as a social and cultural construction. This is now a fairly uncontroversial position within academia, that emphasizes the distinction between biological and social markers of age and life stages, and the importance of symbolic transitions in the construction of life courses—despite the fact that "common sense" in Western society has come to operate around the numerical interpretation of life stages, and the translation of legislation into a social norm of childhood as understood to be below the age of eighteen.

In attempting to answer the question of why the phenomenon of child soldiering has increased in scope and intensity as alleged, Honwana rejects arguments based on essentialist views of African culture as well as those that focus on the instrumental advantage of children over adults as soldiers. Instead, she cites the "crisis of the postcolonial African state," in the context of a transnational process of mobilization and transfer of both military and humanitarian ideas, technologies, and personnel across local warscapes (as per Carolyn Nordstrom's coinage).[1] She dismisses the notion that African societies traditionally sent children into war (a discussion that would have benefited greatly from a reading of T. W. Bennett's article on the topic for the Institute for Security Studies)[2], although her argument appears to imply that use of child soldiers in contemporary wars would have been justifiable on these grounds had the evidence

shown that African societies did in fact use children as soldiers in precolonial times. What Bennett argues more cogently is that: (1) evidence suggests that in African societies which assembled age sets and standing armies for conquest (such as the Nguni of southern Africa in the nineteenth century) young men were generally deployed as warriors three or four years after puberty, hence the use of pre-pubertal children in contemporary armies has no “traditional” basis; and (2) the economic and political changes wrought by colonialism in any case created a significant break with these traditions, dissolving the age sets more effectively than any colonial legislation might have done. Thus, even if one accepts the cultural relativist position on human rights, there is no culturally sound argument in favor of allowing African armies or militias to recruit and deploy pre-pubescent children.

The two middle chapters of the book, chapters 3 and 4, examine the experiences of child soldiers during wartime in Mozambique and Angola. Chapter 3 focuses on the experiences of boys and chapter 4 on those of girls. Both chapters are framed by the question of whether these children should be considered victims or perpetrators, and both ultimately answer the question using the concept of “tactical agency” adapted from Michel de Certeau. A tactical agent is one whose realm of available choice is severely constrained and who acts from a position of weakness, but who nonetheless may take the initiative to find strategies to cope with the situation and to carve out opportunities for improvement or at least survival. For boy soldiers, this involved deceiving commanders by feigning stupidity or weakness, lying, playing tricks or obscuring the truth, conducting their own unauthorized looting missions, or finding opportunities to reminisce about home and carry out activities outside the realm of military sanction. For the girls, it meant developing longer lasting relationships with soldiers who held military power, in order to improve their own security and potentially gain access to shared booty or material comforts in camp life. Yet despite her discussion of agency, the emphasis in these chapters is most centrally on the descriptions of physical, mental and sexual abuse, torture and atrocities, which the boys experienced, perpetrated, and witnessed, and which the girls mainly witnessed and suffered. Interestingly, Honwana contests the boys’ attempts to absolve themselves of guilt on the basis of their helplessness, stating, “Their identification with their victims underlines, rather than excuses, their moral responsibility” (p. 69).

Chapter 5 moves to the postwar period, focusing on rituals and ceremonies for the social reintegration of war-

affected children. Honwana argues that cleansing or purification rituals functioned as a means for individual and collective healing of past wounds and protection of current and future social harmony. She also presents rituals and ceremonies as an important means of conflict resolution, reconciliation, and social reintegration of war-affected persons. She notes that the details of such rituals are “distinctive to particular ethnolinguistic group but their themes are common to all groups in Mozambique and Angola” (p. 110). The ethnographic detail provided here is interesting, but it would have been useful if Honwana had provided more analysis of the rituals within their social context and a discussion of the significance of variations upon these common themes. More problematic is the way rituals and ceremonies are presented as if there were no contestation surrounding their performance and meanings. No reference is made to social and political power relationships embodied in and expressed through ritual, nor of the deeply fractured and politicized nature of local authority in many postwar contexts such as Mozambique and Angola—despite examples given in the text of situations where angry spirits of the dead appeared in clearly politicized contexts (for example, on pp. 130-131).

The story of Pitango presented in this chapter is an illustration of the existence of contestation and debate between combatants and local authority figures over the need for, and meaning of, postwar ritual. Pitango is an 18-year-old Angolan returned soldier who argues against the elders’ position that he requires treatment by a healer, but who is eventually convinced to undergo the ceremonies after a period of serious problems in the community. Honwana notes that “social stigma and intolerance might drive them [former soldiers] to conform to local practices” (p. 119), but she does not apply this insight to her policy recommendations.

These examples suggest the need for further reflection upon the ways in which the participation of young people in armed conflict might be bound up with local gerontocratic structures of power. At the very least, there needs to be careful examination before recommending the wholesale promotion of “traditional healing” processes by humanitarian organizations, as Honwana’s conclusion promotes. Recent research on processes of social and political reconciliation in Sierra Leone, for example, argues that the dominance of a minority of powerful elder males in rural society was part of the precipitating context for the participation of young males in armed conflict.[3] Hence, the attempts by agencies to work with “traditional leaders” in the reintegra-

tion of former combatants may end up strengthening a system whose dysfunction was intimately connected with the dynamics of conflict. Given the complexity of the contemporary status of “traditional” leaders in Mozambique, as discussed by numerous scholars over the past decade (for example, Harry West, Graham Harrison, Harri Englund, Jocelyn Alexander, Pekka Virtanen, Alice Dinerman, inter alia), it seems overly optimistic of Honwana to state that local leaders and healers “look after the interests of the community as a whole and have specialized knowledge of how to guarantee its welfare” (p. 132).

A more sound conclusion of the book is Honwana’s warning to agencies wishing to intervene in such postwar contexts that “ignoring or antagonizing traditional healing systems as superstitious or backward is not productive and will ultimately be ineffective” (p. 156). She provides a succinct discussion of the way Western biomedical and psychotherapeutic notions of distress and trauma do not fit with many African cosmologies and philosophies of health and illness. Her point that cultural and religious traditions involving spiritual beliefs are in constant evolution is well taken, and is consistent with general trends in African studies arguing that “traditions” and “modernity” are not incompatible or dichotomous but rather interact and evolve in processes of mutual shaping. It would have been useful if Honwana had taken this discussion further, to engage with the complexities surrounding attempts to integrate local practices into external intervention programs. She makes a brief mention of the fact that some indigenous healing practices are judged by interventionists to have unsafe and deleterious effects, but does not go beyond this acknowledgement of the potential incompatibility and confrontation between local knowledge and official policy.

If the dynamics of local history, society, and politics are not taken into account sufficiently in relation to policy recommendations, their neglect is also problematic on a theoretical plane. This problem stems in large part from the book’s attempt to generate broad conclusions about “child soldiers in Africa” on the basis of research that is fundamentally anchored in an in-depth understanding of one region of southern Mozambique. Honwana’s doctoral dissertation research and other local studies place her in a good position to discuss broad patterns of sociality, healing, and postwar processes in Maputo province (or at least, specific parts of the province), but the application of that ethnographic understanding to the rest of Mozambique and much of Angola, let alone the entirety of Africa, causes serious problems of analysis. Thus, the discussion of child soldiers’ experiences is not

anchored in a theoretically informed analysis of conflict in Mozambique or Angola. First, the post-independence conflicts in Mozambique and Angola were significantly different from each other in numerous respects. Secondly, each conflict took distinct forms according to regional, local, and intra-communal historical and socio-economic variations within each country. These differences affected the dynamics of conflict as well as postwar social and political trajectories at local and national levels. This is not to say that no meaningful generalizations can be made across these specific contexts, but it does require a more nuanced analysis that addresses the interaction between local and “translocal” (to use Harri Englund’s phrase)[4], features of conflict, and post-conflict social change.

Despite these concerns, there is much to recommend Honwana’s book for those interested in child soldiers’ narratives from the two conflicts and the rich ethnographic descriptions of healing rituals and cleansing ceremonies, and for those who are looking for policy recommendations on postwar programs for war-affected children and child soldiers. Honwana’s discussion of agency and her adaptation of De Certeau’s framework to theorizing about child soldiers in contemporary civil conflicts in Africa make a novel contribution to the field. The revelation of the disconnect between local worldviews and universalized Western human rights approaches to protecting children in war is important, and the recommendation to integrate these seemingly contradictory philosophies provides serious food for thought for international human rights activists.

Notes

[1]. Carolyn Nordstrom, *A Different Kind of War Story* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997).

[2]. T. W. Bennett, *Using Children in Armed Conflict: A Legitimate African Tradition?* Monograph 32, (Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies, 1998): <http://www.iss.co.za/Pubs/Monographs/No32/UsingChildren.html>

[3]. L. Stovel, “There is No Bad Bush to Throw away a Bad Child’: ’Tradition’-Inspired Reintegration in Postwar Sierra Leone,” paper presented at the Centre for Security and Defence Studies Speaker Series public lecture, University of Carleton, October 23, 2006.

[4]. Harry Englund, *From War to Peace on the Mozambique-Malawi Borderland* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-safrica>

Citation: Jessica Schafer. Review of Honwana, Alcinda, *Child Soldiers in Africa*. H-SAfrica, H-Net Reviews. October, 2007.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13726>

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.