

---

## “How Many People Have You Killed?”

Child-Soldiers in Literature and Film

« Combien de personnes as-tu tuées ? ». *Les enfants-soldats dans la littérature et le cinéma*

**Catarina Martins**

---



**Electronic version**

URL: [http://  
etudesafriaines.revues.org/17444](http://etudesafriaines.revues.org/17444)  
ISSN: 1777-5353

**Publisher**

Éditions de l'EHESS

**Printed version**

Date of publication: 16 September 2013  
Number of pages: 649-675  
ISBN: 978-2-7132-2388-4  
ISSN: 0008-0055

**Electronic reference**

Catarina Martins, « “How Many People Have You Killed?” », *Cahiers d'études africaines* [Online], 211 | 2013, Online since 23 October 2015, connection on 26 January 2017. URL : [http://  
etudesafriaines.revues.org/17444](http://etudesafriaines.revues.org/17444)

---

The text is a facsimile of the print edition.

© Cahiers d'Études africaines

# “How Many People Have You Killed?”

## Child-Soldiers in Literature and Film

- You killed some people? How many?
  - More than 20.
  - Do you like it?
  - Yes, I like it”
- Margolin, *Les Petits soldats* (2004).

In the last decade the issue of children’s participation in armed conflict has been object of increasing concern from the international public opinion. This is manifest in the enormous quantity of auto-biographical testimonies, journalistic reports, documentaries, and even novels and films which flood the market and the Internet in a seemingly common effort of both media and art to draw worldwide awareness to the problem. Interestingly enough, most of the novels and films, which deal with African children, have been either financially supported by humanitarian institutions or awarded with cultural and literary prizes. This, in turn, seems to reveal an international political and humanitarian agenda behind the proliferation of child-soldier narratives and calls for a reflection about how child-soldiers are being represented.

Representation is understood here both in the sense of being repeatedly made present through narrative and description (*Darstellung*), and in the sense of who/which discourse/which power represents them in the same narratives (*Vertretung*). The conflation of both, as we know from Spivak (1988), can amount to an annulment of the subaltern, whose voice is not heard and whose subject status is not recognised in a discursive construction that may bear little resemblance to “reality”. This is very much the case of children in general, who are always relegated to a position of tutelage, and of child-soldiers in particular, whose fragility and dependence are assumed to be stronger due to the experience of war.

This article will examine representations of child-soldiers in literary and cinematographic works from the North and the South, trying to ascertain

which power politics might be at play in the dominant discursive construction of the issue, one that, like most hegemonic discursive formations, tends more strongly towards homogenization than to the acknowledgement of difference, and superposes this homogenization to the empirical experience of specific situations.

## Child-Soldiers

Under the point of view of discursive homogenization, the very notion of child-soldier is particularly revealing. This designation can hardly be more misleading, in both its hyphenated terms, in the sense that it obliterates heterogeneities: child refers to a number of varied realities, namely of age (between 5 to 18 years old), sex (child is a sexless neutral), geography and culture. The same can be said about soldier, which covers everything from regular armies and conscripted minors to forced or voluntary recruits of different kinds of rebel groups, again in varied geographies, cultures and ideological horizons. Clearly, what is at stake here is the political agenda that can be created by binding both terms: one that underlines vulnerability and the need for protection with another that connotes extreme violence. As Honwana (2005: 33) points out: “The binary *child-soldier* produces an oxymoron. How can an innocent child become a soldier?” Innocence as one of the main synonyms of childhood becomes paradoxical when children integrate armies, holding a gun and a licence to kill.

Indeed, a brief analysis of the numerous European and American websites on child-soldiering reveals that the portrait of the child-soldier has formed a sort of pattern that repeats itself incessantly. The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child-Soldiers<sup>1</sup> presents child-soldiers with the following words:

“I would like you to give a message. Please do your best to tell the world what is happening to us, the children. So that other children don’t have to pass through this violence.

The 15-year-old girl who ended an interview to Amnesty International with this plea was forcibly abducted at night from her home by the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), an armed opposition movement fighting the Ugandan Government. She was made to kill a boy who tried to escape. She saw another boy being hacked to death for not raising the alarm when a friend ran away. She was beaten when she dropped a water container and ran for cover under gunfire. She received 35 days of military training and was sent to fight the government army.

The use of children as soldiers has been universally condemned as abhorrent and unacceptable. Yet over the last ten years hundreds of thousands of children have fought and died in conflicts around the world.

Children involved in armed conflict are frequently killed or injured during combat or while carrying out other tasks. They are forced to engage in hazardous activities such as laying mines or explosives, as well as using weapons. Child-soldiers are

---

1. More information about this organization can be found at this website: <<http://www.child-soldiers.org>> (last access, 01.04.2013).

usually forced to live under harsh conditions with insufficient food and little or no access to healthcare. They are almost always treated brutally, subjected to beatings and humiliating treatment. Punishments for mistakes or desertion are often very severe. Girl soldiers are particularly at risk of rape, sexual harassment and abuse as well as being involved in combat and other tasks<sup>2</sup>.

This portrait, as well as the strategies of this presentation, are typical of most humanitarian organizations in the North: 1) the use of quotes, attributed to child-soldiers, which generally express a plea for help and protection in the name of “all children”, or describe some of the endured atrocities; 2) a general characterization, which invariably includes: forced recruitment or abduction; being forced to kill or slaughter; most often a member of the family; being witness to extreme acts of violence, specially against other children; being object of humiliation, brutal beatings, rape or sexual slavery, slave labour, and hunger; and unprepared involvement in combat, with all the risks attached to combat situations, including severe injury and death. Generally, the characterization ends with the statement that all these children want peace and the chance to go back to school or to a “lost childhood”.

The construed features of this patterned characterization are obvious. First, it is deeply rooted on a concept of childhood as a state of passivity and vulnerability, which demands protection and is connected to the sheltering functions of family and formal schooling. This explains why “childhood”, though biologically defined through a rigid age-threshold, can be considered “lost” when the standards of protection and education defined by the North are violated. Second, these descriptions aim at creating a status of unquestionable victimhood and innocence, regardless of the particularities of age, context, and culture. There is never room for the possibility of agency, even of a limited or tactical sort. When children are authors of war crimes, these are either omitted from the global portrait (harassing, looting, and raping defenceless civilians are never mentioned) or said to have been committed under the effect of drugs, under death threats, or as a result of brain washing. Recruitment is never really accepted by the humanitarian discourse as voluntary: when children admit to have chosen to enlist, a number of social explanations present this choice as forceful. Again there is no room for agency: the child (who may actually be a young adult) is denied freedom and capacity of choice (Lee 2009: 9).

Furthermore, the enumeration of situations of extreme violence to which these children are exposed aims at ensuring an amount of indignation that can only be expressed through adjectives such as “abhorrent” and “barbaric”. Although the characterization of child-soldiers is most often taken out of context, these adjectives specially concern the so-called post-colonial wars in Africa. Here, other ingredients such as the magical ritualistic framework,

---

2. This quote was taken in 01.06.2010 from <<http://www.child-soldiers.org/childsoldiers/child-soldiers>>. The present version of the website can be accessed at <<http://www.child-soldiers.org>>.

torture and mutilations, and cannibalism, contribute to the representation of a horrific environment most adequately described as outright savagery.

These findings confirm David Rosen's (2005) analysis of humanitarian accounts of the child-soldier issue, which, as he sees it, may be fair, but "provide a limited story" (*ibid.*: 159). According to Rosen, the humanitarian narrative is built upon three main discursive pillars, which he deconstructs: First, the western contemporary "Straight 18 position" that "defines the child-soldier as any person under eighteen years of age who is recruited or used by an army or armed group" (*ibid.*: 3) and which collides with the anthropological and sociological view that the question of who is a child cannot be resolved without taking cultural and historical contexts into account (*ibid.*: 2)<sup>3</sup>. Needless to say, the "Straight 18 position" is closely associated with a conception of all under 18s as specially vulnerable, innocent and easy to manipulate (*ibid.*: 16-17). Second, he refers the tendency to mythologize the past in order to construct an opposition between old traditional wars and new, postcolonial conflicts, in the line of Robert Kaplan's concept of "new barbarism" (*ibid.*: 10). According to this discursive tendency, the former had clear political objectives and were fought according to commonly accepted rules, while the latter are "[...] demonized as purposeless modes of destruction in which 'there are no victors, only victims'" or as a "way of life", "a kind of perversion of culture", very often conflated with terrorism or large scale criminal enterprises affecting mostly civilians (*ibid.*: 11).

As Rosen (*ibid.*: 11-12) demonstrates, this distinction can be applied neither to military conflicts of the past, nor to contemporary wars. What I believe is at stake here is the neo-colonial politics of essentializing a hierarchically superior northern Self and a civilizationally inferior South for the purpose of legitimizing political and military intervention, as well as economic exploitation. Rosen does not give adequate weight in his argument to the imperialist stance of the fact that war in post-colonial contexts is inscribed in a construed "nature" of non-western cultures and that this "inherently" violent and criminal "nature" (from which the South cannot extirpate itself) is valued according to a standard of culture that is western. This cultural judgement is rooted in the discourse of colonial racism and bears similar topoi, like the discrediting of a culture as perverted or deeply pathological, or the epithet "barbaric" itself.

---

3. ROSEN (2005: 4) provides a large number of illustrations of this fact, including examples from non-western societies that demonstrate that "[T]here is no single rule for determining when the young are fit to be warriors, although in most cultures they are in some stage of adolescence", and examples from western history (military education to present-day, the American Civil War and World War I and II) that present the involvement of boys in war as an ennobling "heroic" experience, concluding that "Clearly, the child soldier as an abused and exploited victim of war is a radically new concept" (*ibid.*: 6).

The third pillar of humanitarian discourse on child-soldiering identified and deconstructed by Rosen (*ibid.*: 14-15)—the proliferation of light arms that can easily be used by children—is inextricably linked with the rethorical need to underline the savagery of post-colonial wars, rendering the political discourse and practice that rely on the new barbarism thesis impermeable to counter-argumentation. Indeed, when children are at risk, speaking against this kind of rhetoric—like Rosen does—is excluded as a taboo or blasphemy, for it amounts to “placing weapons in the hands of children”<sup>4</sup>.

In fact, we witness here the use of the child-soldier issue, connected with the idea of childhood as innocence and fragility, for the reinforcement of the abyssal line (Santos de Sousa 2007) drawn by the colonial system between the North and the South. Indeed, when the North “globalises childhood” (Boyden 2004), imposing criteria of legality concerning the child that can hardly be applied to other cultural and social realities, the South is necessarily produced as an outlaw territory—a territory of child abuse, which carries more emotional weight than other situations of illegality. In turn, the status of a “territory without law” (Santos de Sousa 2007: 6), of “untamed nature” or “savagery” confirms northern superiority and legitimates all kinds of intervention, namely appropriation and violence (for instance, through the notion of just wars) (*ibid.*: 9)<sup>5</sup>. Both gain a particular sort of legitimacy due to the high symbolical dimension and the deep affective investment of the idea of the child: indeed, intervention in the name of children in the South gives the neo-colonial civilizing mission and neo-colonial occupation the contours of an unquestionable moral mission of redemption. The failure of African states and societies to guarantee a “universal right” of children is presented in such a way that it reinforces the need for paternalist action by the North, which will save the South from itself. As the North restates its hegemony as sole centre of reference, the South is forever fixed to the non-contemporariness of an atavistic, primitive, barbaric past.

Yet, if we agree with Comaroff and Comaroff (2005: 19) that the “globalization of childhood” reveals the imperial logic inherent to modernity, and if we analyse humanitarian child-soldier discourse from the point of view of post-colonial theory, there are other elements besides the three pillars synthesized by Rosen that must be deconstructed. They denounce this discourse’s roots in a hegemonic northern point of view.

Focusing mainly on the African context (though this is also true of other post-colonial regions) the oxymoron present in the notion of child-soldiering

4. This argument is present in a review of *Armies of the Young* by Eugenia KIESLING (2006), whose title is emblematic: “Let the Children Kill!” Not surprisingly the reviewer works with the US Military Academy.

5. The involvement of children in warfare was used, for example, by former US President George Bush to legitimize the invasion of Iraq as a “just” war, regardless of the fact that the US army also recruits under 18s (LEE 2009: 14).

is not actually between innocence and soldiery but between innocence and savagery. This oxymoron confronts, on the one hand, a value that was born with bourgeois Enlightenment, placed at the core of modernity, and whose preservation became a criterion for measuring the degree of civilization, as defined by the West/North; and, on the other hand, the ultimate “heart of darkness”, which offers western civilization its most extreme Other, the last frontier of the mission of civilization, and confirms the identities of the two poles of colonial power relations within the discourse of imperialism: Africa as the intrinsically irrational, primitive *black* hole, where violence is an inextricable part of nature, and which will eternally be dependent on intervention from the North. This new civilizing mission acquires an accrued ethical legitimacy, by assuming the violation of purity as the very definition of evil, from which children have to be protected as a universal good that belongs not so much to their context of origin but to Humanity as a whole and to the West/North as its paladin. Thus, the exercise of imperial power—be it through military, humanitarian or development aid intervention—is legitimated. This, I would argue, is the main message that results from northern representations of African child-soldiers.

### Representations of African Child-Soldiers in the North

European documentary films on the child-soldier issue generally show an identical strategy: the presentation of ex-child-soldiers, found mostly in rehabilitation centres in countries like Liberia, Sierra Leone and Uganda, as they tell their stories to someone behind a camera. This is the case of *Lost Children*, directed by the Iranian Ali Samadi Ahadi and by the German Oliver Stoltz<sup>6</sup>, which accompanies the trajectory of four ex-child-soldiers, three boys and a girl aged 8 to 14, from their admission in a rehabilitation centre in North Uganda, throughout the rehabilitation process and the reintegration in the families.

The official presentation of the film describes its context as “the most cruel form of war”<sup>7</sup>, qualified as such because of the use of children as soldiers, and because these are “kidnapped, armed and forced to murder their own families”<sup>8</sup>. The background information about the conflict in

6. This film was awarded the “Deutscher Filmpreis” in 2006, and the Panorama-Publikumspreis in the 2005 edition of the Berlin Film festival, among several other awards (see <<http://www.lost-children.de/en/festival.htm>>, last access 01.06.2010). Also, the film was used as an instrument for persuading political representatives, such as the European Parliament in February 2006 or the German Parliament in March 2006 (<<http://www.lost-children.de/en/home.htm>>, 01.06.2010).

7. “[...] die gemeinste Form des Kriegs”. All translations are mine.

8. “Kinder werden entführt, bewaffnet und gezwungen, ihre eigenen Familien zu ermorden.”

Uganda is summary and submitted to keywords such as “unimaginable terror” and “religious fanaticism”, clearly indicating that this war is one of the new, post-colonial barbaric wars<sup>9</sup>.

The directors claim to film coherently from “the children’s perspective”. Their intention is to let the viewer witness how the children speak about their stories and feelings, in an “authentic” environment without mediation. Yet, the unconstrained behaviour and speech of the child are in this case an unsustainable fiction, not only because a filming crew of white foreigners is present, but because many of the sequences have been staged, as the position of the camera often reveals. This strategy is manifest of a denial of the extensively constructed nature of the film, which is particularly evident when subtitled direct speech is replaced by “voice over” speeches by foreign voices in German, notably children’s voices with a “little angel” pitch<sup>10</sup>. One of these sequences is eloquent of the film’s ideological agenda. It depicts an amusement scene in which children and social workers dance to traditional percussion rhythms. The youngest of the film’s protagonists, Opio, 8 years old, refuses to participate in the general enjoyment. Though he is marginal on the screen, a voice over that poses as his dominates the sequence with the following speech, built along the lines of the northern humanitarian discourse on child-soldiering:

“I wish I could go home [...]. When I was kidnapped, I was very small. Now I feel that I know more things. I learned many things in the bush. I grew up. I know many places. I know how to fire a gun. It is very easy. When you pull the trigger you kill (Ahadi & Stoltz, 55’54’)”<sup>11</sup>.

The film reveals three strategies of presenting child-soldiers and Africa. The first is the typical use of the paradox between the nature of children as inherently innocent and good, and their role as perpetrators of the most atrocious crimes, such as murdering their own families, killing mothers in

9. This perception of the Ugandan war is echoed in the press. German reference newspapers, such as *Der Spiegel*, state: “There is a war in North-Uganda of which we do not know anything in Europe. It has lasted for almost 20 years, and has cost the lives of over 200 000 people. This war is led with a cruelty that surpasses everything, yes, everything that we have ever heard about war. ‘Lost children’ deals with a particularly awful side of these ‘new’ wars (because they do not involve states, but gangs): child-soldiering” (BRUSSIG 2005).

10. In an interview included in the DVD edition, one of the directors, Stoltz, reacts to the negative reviews of the use of “voice over”, by saying that this strategy allowed him to “foreground the emotional experience”, thus revealing a clear preference for sensationalism at the expense of authenticity.

11. “Ich möchte so gern nach Hause [...]. Als ich entführt wurde, war ich sehr klein. Jetzt habe ich das Gefühl, mehr zu wissen. Ich habe viele Dinge im Busch gelernt. Ich bin groß geworden. Ich kenne viele Orte. Ich weiß, wie man mit einer Waffe schießt. Es ist sehr einfach. Wenn du abdrückst, tötest Du.”



front of their children, and cutting people to small pieces with machetes<sup>12</sup>. Yet, the climax of the paradox between children and horror is reached when Opio describes in subtitled direct speech how he exploded a man's brain and gave its content to his recruits to eat. The fact that cannibalism—upgraded into sheer horror because the protagonists are children—persists in the 21<sup>st</sup> century portrays Africa as preserving a status of savagery.

The same idea comes up in a second strategy typical of this kind of documentaries: the contradictory representation of the cultural context. On the one hand, there is an apparent concern with depicting the particularities of African culture. Yet this is tinged by an Africanist underlying text that leads the directors to show those elements that their northern public will associate with a stereotypical Africa. One of them is magic: the film's longest sequence, for example, is dedicated to the purifying ritual of Kilama, 13 years old. The exaggerated attention devoted to the ritual corresponds to a kind of sensationalist voyeurism of the exotic that represents Africa as a continent of witchcraft. This way the Dark Continent is situated in an atavistic irrational past. On the other hand, there is no real contextual understanding of the fact that Kilama's family refuses to welcome the boy home on the grounds that the community would not feel safe around him (Ahadi & Stoltz, 12'39"). Reintegration is presented as a natural obligation of families without further questioning of the fact that the violent acts of child-soldiers are often committed against their own family members, who furthermore did not possess the same concept of the child as inherently innocent from the start. This is due to the northern set of concepts concerning not only childhood, but also the role of the family in child protection and care, which excludes other notions of family, community and even of the child that, as in this case, include the idea of responsibility and accountability.

Furthermore, the lengthy attention devoted to a constructed stereotypical Africa contrasts with the extensive omission of the actual contexts in which the children evolve and that point out to cultural heterogeneity in the experience of childhood. The documentary's presentation text mentions the child-soldiers' wish to "be a child again and live". However, it does not further reflect on what being a child meant for each of the involved infants. Significantly, children's experiences and living conditions prior to joining the rebel army are not mentioned, which is the opposite strategy of African literary narratives (as we shall see below), and also of

---

12. The symbolic value of this particular weapon is relevant here. The machete is associated with barbarism and savagery—more so than guns—, since the kind of death it provokes is particularly bloody—thus dirty and spectacular—, implies a deeper profaning of the body (cuts and dismemberment) and a proximity between perpetrator and victim that underlines the cruelty and bestiality of the latter as a predator. The machete is also known as a "typical" African weapon.

child-soldiers' autobiographies<sup>13</sup>. For instance, no questioning is devoted to the fact that Jennifer, a 14 year old girl, states that she would rather return to the rebel army in which she was used as a sexual slave than to go back to her father's house. Likewise, Jennifer's life after rehabilitation is seen as a return to a "lost childhood". Yet, the girl becomes a working minor and an adolescent mother living with a man twice her age. The fact that the directors are unaware that neither of these ways of living is comparable to the idea of infancy as "home, play and school" is revealing of a frame of thought anchored in the western hegemonic conception of the child.

Finally, though *Lost Children* shows infants as cruel murderers and cannibals, it leaves out rape crimes they might have committed. As in the humanitarian discourse, they are not even mentioned in the documentary. More than violence, an active sexuality is the feature that most contradicts the idea of the child as innocent. This is probably one of the reasons why the choice of the protagonists singled out three impuberal boys and a girl, allowing for sexuality to appear as passive and rape exclusively in the perspective of the victim.

*Lost Children* tells as much about neo-colonial power relations and the re-writing of the discourse of imperialism as about child-soldiers. Their portrait serves—even if maybe unconsciously—the hegemony of the North over Africa relegated anew to the same place of subalternity, with different though emotionally and ethically unbeatable arguments. As Di Caprio's character puts it in *Blood Diamond* (Zwick 2006), "TIA, This is Africa": the red African soil testifies of bloodshed as the eternal dark history of the continent.

In Edward Zwick's (2006) film, the child-soldier issue is secondary and used as a kind of stage-setting that documents the dimension of African evilness, an evilness that arises from an exotic mixture of devilish beauty and incomprehensible violence. Children suffer and die in rebel camps, which are portrayed as orgiastic chaos of irrepressible Dionysian instincts, mixing dance, alcohol, drugs, sex and weapons. However, all ends well when the white hero and a providential American journalist save one particular boy soldier and the West calls him to its bosom—even if all the other children get bombed in that process. The script links war in Sierra Leone to diamond traffic, and this to market demands in Europe and the United States, and to economic interests led by the G8, very much like the typical plot of commercial books and films about Africa. However, Africa is still pictured as the ultimate irretrievable "heart of darkness", where white people are always good (even mercenaries), and "good blacks" are always no more

---

13. These are not the object of this paper. Yet, it suffices to mention the best-known child-soldier biography: *A Long Way Gone*, by Ishmael BEAH (2008), in which life prior to being drafted is detailed at length and contrasts to the little space devoted to the narration of life as a soldier.

than heroic exceptions. The film goes as far as to make the “good African” utter a longing for colonialism, which seems particularly justified by the extreme portrait of the destruction Africans are bringing upon themselves. The crossing of the last frontier—that of childhood’s innocence and promise—is presented as the definite impossibility of a future, the ultimate denial of an independent History for Africans, and the reassuring confirmation of western paternalism and supremacy.

### Representation of African Child-Soldiers in the South

Although tracing a divide between the North and Africa may be simplistic, fact remains that literature and film by African authors present a significantly more varied spectrum of approaches to the child-soldier issue. Remarkable is the engagement of important African authors of high literature in a role of resistance to the representations coming from the North. This role is also chosen by African film directors.

It is the case of *Ezra* (Aduaka 2007) by the Nigerian director Newton I. Aduaka who, in an interview, presents his film as a reaction to the patterned northern representations of child-soldiers:

“It was really my intention to speak not just what I saw in those news reports from the children, you know, with the western camera man with his camera [points to the shoulder] and asking ‘did you lose a lot because of the war’. Of course they lost a lot. ‘What do you want to do with your life now?/I want to go to school.’ Of course they want to go to school. But where is the school fee going to come from? I wanted Ezra as a character to say his own anger. Yes, I killed people, but I’m angry. And it is difficult to take that stand. It’s almost like you are not entitled to it. But I wanted these characters to be entitled to it, because I know that’s what they felt on the inside. They felt betrayed” (*ibid.*).

In order to create this space of resistance, where child-soldiers acquire the right to express their anger and their betrayal, Aduaka creates his main character as an adolescent, an ex-soldier who voices his revolt before a Truth and Reconciliation Committee. This Committee’s aim is to investigate the crimes committed during the war, in order to foster reconciliation between the perpetrators and the victims. Unlike the European documentaries, this perspective foregrounds the responsibility of the young soldier (the use of the term child is most inadequate here) who claims the right to be treated as an adult and according to his military rank. Indeed, conscious agency by adolescent soldiers is underlined in the film, for example through the love story between Ezra and Mariam, a remarkably mature girl-soldier with strong cultural and ideological formation, who volunteers to fight for the cause of democracy and social justice, though she is lucid about the corruption of political ideals by greedy leaders and diamond traffic.

Though the film preserves a portrait of extreme violence and suffering inflicted upon child-soldiers (being kidnapped, slave work, disproportionate military tasks, vulnerability in combat, death, drugs), it also includes sequences of raids in which the same degree of violence is exercised by the child-soldiers upon the community, even if under the effect of drugs. In one of these, Ezra murders his own parents. Also, the typical rhetoric of innocence used by the humanitarian discourse, particularly by religious organizations, is in turn criticised as an inadequate solution for a problem which is both individual and collective. An accent is set moreover on the need to appease the community, who is also a victim of child-soldiering. The community is entitled the right to claim amends by the ex-soldier, who is considered a common murderer according to a notion of childhood and youth which does not comprise innocence as a norm. According to the film, both the appeasement of the community and the overcoming of trauma by the ex-soldier can only be achieved by expiation and reparation of guilt. This is sought by Ezra's sister, Onitcha: Even if she supports and helps her brother, Onitcha nonetheless demands that he avows his crimes, so that he can purify himself and the family and build a future. Though voiceless (she had her tongue cut off by child-soldiers), she functions as a kind of Greek tragedy's choir, who thrusts Ezra deep into his own dilemmas.

Unfortunately, Aduaka fails to solve the main issues it raises. One of the film's weaknesses is the final indecision between responsibility and innocence for Ezra, for though he claims agency as soldier he does not acknowledge the murder of his parents. The final speeches by the judges of the TRC ambiguously echo the innocent child's *topos* and a "short-circuited" Ezra ends up caught in the redemptive humanitarian bosom, in which even a black Santa Claus is at call—one that does not bring presents to forgotten African children. Still, *Ezra* puts up a number of problems that the representations from the North ignore or camouflage, such as the inner dilemmas and trauma of the ex-combatant, including his dignity as young adult, and the responsibility and the role that he can or should play within the community as an equal social subject and actor. Moreover, when the film accords both the community and the ex-soldier the position of war victims, this never happens as passive objects of compassion, unable to take their future in their own hands and forever dependent of outside intervention.

As for African literature, in English and in French, I would suggest that the child-soldier issue is somehow creating a tradition of representation. There are similar esthetical strategies that find a common root in *Sozaboy. A Novel in Rotten English* (1985, 2006) by the Nigerian Ken Saro-Wiwa (1941-1995). The most important are: 1) a first person narrator; 2) the portrait of the protagonist (a boy soldier) as a picaresque anti-hero; 3) the use of humour and irony (that would be unthinkable in the dramatic northern narratives); and 4) the creation of a particular language by the child—the "rotten English" mentioned in the title—which claims for a post-colonial

reading as a language of resistance. To be exact, Saro-Wiwa's novel is not (yet) a child-soldier story, for the young soldier is not seen as a child. His youth and his social status, both present in the word "boy", make him occupy a marginal position that allows him an apparently naïve, but very lucid paradoxical perspective on war—both from the inside (as a participant) and from the outside of the conflict. It also allows him to traverse different contending camps and territories denouncing the absurd of military conflict.

Similar aesthetical strategies are adopted in *Allah n'est pas obligé* (2000) by Ahmadou Kourouma (1927-2003), from the Ivory Coast. The narrator is again a boy soldier, Birahima, who, among many other things, presents a detailed account of his early childhood and of the motives that made him a soldier—something that is generally omitted in representations from the North. As other child-soldiers die, it is also Birahima that, according to an ancestral tradition, sings their funeral sermons. These describe not so much children's experiences as fighters, but mostly how soldiery became their inevitable and tragic life path. More importantly the funeral sermons include the war crimes the children perpetrated: murders, looting, drugs, raping and cannibalism. Kourouma is very distant from the western notion of childhood: nowhere do we find a word about purity or innocence, nor youngsters as passive objects of protection. The accent is on the diversity of life stories and on violence and suffering, including arms and rape, previously to becoming a soldier, and on the extreme cruelty children and youngsters are capable of. Furthermore, Birahima funeral sermons underline how war became an inevitable and tragic path for children in states, societies and families that are fractured and impregnated with violence. Birahima's tone is that of sarcastic irony and insolent disdain, a tone of revolt that we would hardly ever find in representations from the North.

It is more important to note that the child-soldier issue does not build the centre of the narrative<sup>14</sup>. In fact, Kourouma's text spends most of its pages presenting an extensive historical account of how conflicts in a vast region of West Africa (Guinea, Ivory Coast, Liberia and Sierra Leone) evolved, including social, religious, cultural, and ethnical causes, and the exact role of political leaders in neighbouring countries, as well as of international organizations. Thus, it becomes clear that the choice of a boy soldier as a narrator is instrumental in a much broader story: indeed, Birahima is a kind of picaresque hero that crosses borders, conflicting camps, social geographies, discourses and languages with an easiness that results from his marginal condition as a youth and an orphan in a disrupted

---

14. I cannot agree with ROSEN (2009: 127, n. 28) when he states that Kourouma's novel merely "contain[s] episodes in which child soldiers appear". A child-soldier is the narrator of the novel and child-soldiering its motivation. *Allah n'est pas obligé*, as much as *Sozaboy*, has also played the role of modelling other literary child-soldier representations, as I shall show below.

social context. Birahima's narrative is actually that of a fragmented post-colonial reality, in which there are no longer socially predetermined roles, not even for children. On the contrary, youngsters are the first to reveal societal fractures and to move for survival in the interstices of chaotic reality. This admirable skill is used by the author for the purpose of social criticism as he paints an enormous satirical fresco of those countries' societies, including, in particular, the caricature of the war lords and their armies as well as picturesque characters such as the quack sorcerer who is always able to acquire richness, thanks to the overall prevalence of superstition, which is criticised. More than a real protagonist (for he is neither responsible for, nor the centre of narrative events), Birahima represents the mobile location where crossed perspectives can be articulated. Here, the ironical use of picaresque marginality is important as a site of citation of different discourses and of the political, social and religious powers they represent. Citation, like all the aesthetical strategies based upon language in the novel, is used as an instrument of resistance. This happens first through the use of pidgin—in this case the “dialect” presented as “petit nègre” (Kourouma 2000: 9), a kind of incorrect French specific of the colonised black speaker—, which states the refusal of assimilation by a neo-colonial order. Second, it is achieved by the constant presence of four dictionaries which allow Birahima, through constant translation, to search “un parler approximatif” (*ibid.*: 11) that will allow him not only to tell his story but to implicate in it as much the “français, toubab, colon, colonialiste et raciste” of the Larousse dictionary (*ibid.*: 233), as the “nègres noirs africains indigènes sauvages” (*ibid.*: 174), whose world-view is gathered in the “*Inventaire des particularités lexicales du français en Afrique noire*” (*ibid.*: 11). In the interstices that reveal the clash between colonizer and colonized, Birahima finds the space for his own vision of reality and for his own language and vocabulary, which is again that of very strong social criticism and of anger. This approach is, of course, the radical opposite of the out-of-context representations from the North, because it rejects not only the western idea of childhood but also the neo-colonial discourse which typifies Africa, though at the same time ferociously attacking the political regimes and African societies. Kourouma also makes clear, on the one hand, that war and the use of children are both products of major social disruption and, on the other hand, that soldiering may even be understood as an expression of agency by children who attempt to find a place and an identity in a world where they never enjoyed nor the havens the North conceived for their protection, nor a social understanding as innocent, “chic et mignon” (*ibid.*: 12). In fact, having been a soldier may actually become a socially accepted role. In *Quand on refuse on dit non* (*ibid.* 2004), a posthumously published sequel to *Allah n'est pas obligé*, it is Birahima's expertise as former child-soldier that allows him to accompany a young woman in a similar trip through geography and history—this time that of the writer's

own country, also engaged in ethnic warfare. Significantly, there is no questioning about what Birahima might have done in war, or of his eventual criminal nature: his past and thus acquired social identity are merely accepted as such and put to use.

The extent to which the historical political and social context is depicted in the novel is manifest of where the author finds the solution for the child-soldier problem, namely in the political resolution of conflicts. This, however, seems as improbable as the redemption of youth and of the whole of the African population, since, as the title of the novel proclaims, “Allah n’est pas obligé [...]”.

A similar statement about the political resolution of conflicts, though with a greater amount of hope, is made by Emmanuel Dongala (2002), from the Congo, in his novel *Johnny Chien Méchant*. This novel presents the two-fold strategy of, on the one hand, corrosively criticising politics in Africa, as well as political and economic powers and humanitarian organizations from the North and, on the other hand, underlining the promise of a future present both in African societies as in some protagonists of these northern organizations.

Dongala’s novel has two protagonists who live and read from opposite perspectives the occupation of a non-identified capital of Central Africa during a *coup d’État*. The first is Johnny Chien Méchant, a 15 year old soldier of the rebel militias who commands a brigade of child-soldiers. Again, this character is an anti-hero, whose picaresque traits are his ridiculous, constantly inadequate and fantasious perception both of the situations he goes through and of himself. His identity problems and the gap between his actions and his self-image are manifest in his constant ludicrous attempts to find himself a suitable war name. Johnny is a kind of Quijote or Candide transferred into a military conflict in 21<sup>st</sup> century Central Africa. In spite of the military leadership, of the evilness and brutality he imagines or states himself capable of (inspired by models like Rambo), Johnny proves to be a coward and inapt leader: his most violent orders, including random shooting of civil populations, are panic reactions to situations that overwhelm him. In spite of the intellectual skills he repeatedly boasts of, what comes to the fore is his ignorance and credulity (for instance, concerning superstition and political demagogy), and the naiveness of his (mis)understanding of reality. This caricature not only allows to unveil the truths that only the fool can express, but also underlines the tragic dimension that comes from the fact that this adolescent, unskilled for facing life, bears the power of the arms and commits collective rapes, summary executions (including of children) and looting without any kind of moral scruples. The only solid side of Johnny’s personality is, rather, the decided way he incarnates the culture and discourse of the type of masculinity associated with militarism and violence. In this perspective, it is noteworthy that Chien Méchant is first introduced to the reader by the rape of an older woman, a TV-star named TT. This episode is not only revealing of the paradoxes of this character,

namely that between intellectual and emotional immaturity on the one hand and sexual maturity on the other, but also of the fact that these soldiers are not to be mistaken with the assexuality we meet in northern representations of child-soldiers. At the same time Dongala is also condemning a certain kind of masculine culture which identifies adulthood and virility with sexual activity and the domination of women.

This is the reason why the other protagonist, who functions as counterpoint to Johnny in this double-voiced story, must be a woman. Laokolé, a 16 year old, represents the perspective of the victims—that is, the civilians persecuted by the militias in the occupation of the city. Laokolé is an exceptional, morally superior adolescent with mature emotions and an unshakeable pragmatic rationality. Although she witnessed the murder of her father and the mutilation of her mother by the militias, she takes in her own hands the survival of her younger brother and the handicapped mother, pushing her in a wheelbarrow as they flee across town. From the start she refuses to be considered a child and decidedly assumes her role not only as an adult, but as a mother who has the duty and the responsibility of protecting the younger and the older generations: “À seize ans, on était déjà une femme. Je suis maintenant la mère de ma mère et la mère de mon frère. Je dois continuer à avancer” (Dongala 2002: 76). Also, she refuses to be seen as a defenseless victim, maintaining an outstanding dignity and a constant ability to recognize kindness when it irrupts unexpectedly within a context of extreme violence. At the same time, she possesses notable intellectual skills and a fascination for science and abstract thought which is manifest in the dream of becoming an engineer. In the novel it is Laokolé who personifies courage and it is also she who defeats and kills Chien Méchant and steps forward for the future she will build with an orphan little girl she adopted.

And yet Laokolé is as much a child of her continent as Johnny, which annuls the possibility of a barbaric society being summarily made responsible for the corruption of their younger ones. It is true that Dongala assertively questions (through the voice of Laokolé): “Quel est ce pays qui tuait de sang-froid ses enfants?” (*ibid.*: 89). Yet he refuses all kinds of simplistic political explanations for conflicts in Africa, included those typically put forward both outside and inside Africa, like tribalism and religion, the everlasting weight of the colonialist heritage, or the economic interests of European or American multinational companies and the exploitation of African economic resources, such as oil or diamonds (*ibid.*: 310-311). As the author states in a radio interview in 2005, none of these are convincing in explaining why the same adolescents he met going to high school became murderers and rapists overnight<sup>15</sup>. Therefore his reflection focuses on the mysteries of human nature which allow dignity, generosity and courage to

---

15. This radio interview is available at <<http://www.archive.org/details/locallygrown>> (01.06.2010).



grow from the same soil as an amount of cruelty that international politics cannot explain. This is expressed by Laokolé, in a conversation with a Belgian journalist:

“Je l’ai écoutée avec attention car j’apprenais beaucoup de choses que je ne soupçonnais pas, par exemple que pour le monde occidental nos gorilles ou notre pétrole comptaient plus que nous les humains, ou encore, ce que j’aurais dû comprendre toute seule tant c’était évident, qu’en nous entretenant nous enrichissions les marchands d’armes. Par contre, je n’arrivais pas à lier l’exploitation du diamant avec la cruauté de ce milicien qui se faisait appeler Chien Méchant et avait abattu à bout portant un gosse qui le suppliait à genoux de ne pas le tuer, ni le pillage de nos ressources minières avec la violence de ce militaire qui avait abattu Papa et fracturé les jambes de Maman et encore moins en quoi le silence des médias occidentaux était responsable de la chasse meurtrière aux Mayi-Dogos. Il fallait que j’y réfléchisse” (*ibid.*: 214-215).

For the same reason Dongala refuses to pinpoint good and evil in terms of white/black, North/South or the reverse. Neither is white colonialism guilty of all African disgrace, nor is the “essence” of the Africans responsible for their problems. Dongala tries to find a measure of political and human justice in attributing roles for the huge task of solving conflicts in Africa by recognizing the possibilities and limits of northern well-intentioned intervention—through humanitarian organizations and the media, for example—, yet clearly stating that it is up to the Africans to open the path for their future, refusing the statute of indigence that the North ascribes to them.

This is made clear in the same dialog between Laokolé and the journalist. Dongala recognizes the important role of northern media in making the suffering of Africans heard. Yet he also underlines the frontier between journalism and the spectacle of poverty. This is why Laokolé refuses the filming of her mother’s infirmity when the Belgian journalist says that the filming of wounds has more impact upon spectators. Indeed, it is remarkable that the girl avoids anger against the journalist for not respecting her mother’s pain by realizing that she came from a frame of thought that was unable to understand the dignity of Africans who are always ultimately seen as “indigents” (*ibid.*: 217).

This way, Dongala criticizes both the approach of *Lost Children* and the messianic role typically associated with the journalist from the North in films about violence and poverty in Africa, one of which is *Blood Diamond*. The journalist represents the eternal dependence on the North (which will by this means possibly come to the rescue), and the denial of emancipation and “adulthood” to Africans. The verticality, lucidity and dignity of Laokolé, a “child”, stands out as a symbolical rise of Africans against northern paternalism. This is not equivalent to a rise against western values. Indeed, though deeply rooted in the African culture, Laokolé makes her own a kind of thought that is that of western Enlightenment,

underlining the enormous relevance of education not only in science and rationality, but also in ethics, responsibility, and emancipation. This active, assertive, and lucid incorporation of western thought by this very African girl is clearly not the result of colonialism's mission of civilization, which would be one of tutelage and repression, but the opposite: an act of choice and freedom, a powerful claim for equality by someone who is in three ways a subaltern—an African, a woman and a child.

Dongala's novel presents women as agents of a solution for the many difficulties Africa faces and as bearers of a promise of a future. African women, like Laokolé, represent an essential link between generations. They protect both the older generations and children younger than themselves—those who, as it is stated in the novel, "faisaient ce que les enfants savaient plus faire au monde: jouer" (*ibid.*: 427). By displacing the arbitrary age border that opposes child and adult in the North and in international law (the Straight 18 position), the author refuses the oxymoron child-soldier and the link between immaturity and innocence, typical of the North, asserting that cruelty is a part of human nature in all ages, geographies and cultures, but that it is exacerbated by poverty, inequality, ignorance, patriarchy and militarism. And that both voice and responsibility as a subject and social actor (for the better and the worse) are not and cannot be exclusive of adults<sup>16</sup>.

Another different approach to the child-soldier issue by a major African writer is the novel *Transit*, by Abdourahman A. Waberi (2003), from Djibouti. Much more than in Kourouma's case, child-soldiering is not the central issue of this novel. Rather, it is instrumental in what is simultaneously a broad poetic account of the history and identity of Djibouti and the deeply disillusioned expression of an utopia that is central to Waberi's work as a whole: a utopia of migration and encounter of peoples, races, and cultures, one to be held through space, but also through time, and which has the Djiboutian nomadic culture as symbol and justification. The tone of the book is elegiac: as this utopia is expressed, it seems to be already lost, for the nomadic transit that meant a cosmopolitan and enriching cultural

---

16. I totally disagree with ROSEN's (2009: 123) interpretation of *Johnny Chien Méchant*, which, in spite of his extremely valuable deconstruction of hegemonic northern discourses, is still based on a US-centered perspective that allows for such statements as "In the literature, folklore, and song about war, the very common name 'Johnny' has been used to mean very anonymous soldier" and indeed for the argument contained in the very title of his article. As the author's examples demonstrate, this can only be true of the North. Rosen overlooks Dongala's attitude of reaction to hegemonic representations of child-soldier in Africa that is present, among many other things, in the contrast between the names of the two protagonists—Johnny, influenced by globalised culture of American origin—and Laokolé, who bears an African name and represents an emancipated African culture (as I have shown). To be true, it is mostly by undervaluing the double structure of the novel and Laokole's role that Rosen can take it as an easy prey to his reading of child-soldiers representations as universally homogeneous.

exchange has been replaced by the dislocation of refugees and exiles, and by the racist, inhuman immigration and asile policies of Europe (namely of France). Transit and deracination motivated by fear, oppression and poverty are the central subject of the frame of the novel, built by prologue and epilogue, which, in turn, encompass the actual chapters: these are dedicated to the history of Djibouti since independence, to French colonialism before that, to the History of migrations in that region of the globe, reaching as far as Antiquity, as well as to the post-independence period of political corrupt regimes and civil war.

Waberi is not writing about child-soldiers, but about his nation. This is why the characters who lend their voices to this patchwork reconstruction of a national utopia have foremost a symbolic function: There is Harbi, who bears the name of a national hero and represents the generation of independence intellectuals, educated in the colonial metropole, who the post-independence regimes marginalize into opposition, clandestinity, prison, and exile. There is his wife, Alice, a Frenchwoman who represents an anti-colonial West that foregrounds humanity and ethics to race and politics and embraces her husband's culture in a way that surpasses his, becoming active agent of the *métissage* that is also central to Waberi's utopia of transit. She dies at the hands of the Djiboutian regime. Then, there is Awaleh, the grand-father, whose narrative extends to the colonial and pre-colonial past, including legend and myth. And finally, there are the two boys that, in spite of their wholly different personalities, educations and life stories, are brought together at the end of the novel, as the first, Abdo-Julien, son of Harbi and Alice, dies in civil war, and is replaced in his right to asile in France by Bachir Benladen, the boy soldier. These two, of course, stand for the present of the country, in respectively its idealized and real versions (they are the same age as Djibouti). Abdo-Julien with his hyphenized name is the personification of *métissage* and cultural encounter over place and time (Waberi 2003: 40): on the one hand, he incarnates the nation's memory, for he brings his grandfather's stories into the present and narrates African and Djiboutian, but also world History through its factual and cultural landmarks (revealing an extraordinary erudition and an astonishing mastery of language). His grandfather states: "L'arbrisseau de la mémoire, devine? Le cactus. C'est bien toi, mon petit cactus" (*ibid.*: 102). On the other hand, Abdo-Julien is an ideal for the future: he forms a music band that stands for national unity, fusing tribes, languages and generations. In the words of his mother, he stands for independence, and this is synonym of utopia: "[...] il avait aussi le même âge que l'indépendance (l'indépendance c'est surtout la puissance d'utopie—tous les combats rêvés et menés et leurs devenirs catastrophiques) [...]" (*ibid.*: 136).

However, this utopia fails and is replaced by a terrible reality that carries with it the condemnation of a future for Djibouti. This is personified by the demobilised child-soldier, the most constant voice in the novel and that which is exclusively consecrated to narrating events of the contemporary

political conjuncture, dominated by civil war, and to criticising corrupt and violent politicians. Bachir Benladen's portrait and discourse as a child-soldier seem to have been inspired by Birahima's: he is also—and much more so—the narrator of a story that transcends him (the space his particular story occupies in the novel is little) and he poses as a bold, defiant bully, who boasts of his war crimes. Moreover, he speaks in the broken French of an uneducated child from the streets, which is also penetrated by complex expressions of the colonizer's language. This language mix, though, has lost the role it played in Kourouma's novel and sounds somewhat displaced. The only novelty is the nickname Benladen, which signals a deeper attachment of Djiboutians to the East and to Islam than to the West, though both make a competitive claim over this African region and both are agents of what Waberi (*ibid.*: 17) calls "cette terre si rétrécie".

Bachir is an adolescent that grew up in poverty, and, as he says, has been integrated in *va* (*vie active*), that is, life on the streets, very early. He derives existential sense from war (*ibid.*: 43), since integration in military ranks provided him with food, confort (even some luxuries, alcohol, and girls), companionship, and status, mostly by being able to inspire fear among the civil population through the use of weapons. Nothing in this portrait points to fragility and innocence, rather to the extreme violence and lack of scruples resulting from the replacement of an ethical education (the eventual role models are corrupt and immoral political and military leaders) by strategies of survival. Crimes like murder, rape, looting, terror, and the use of drugs are mentioned as current, common, day-to-day activities of soldiers who regard themselves as adults, never as children (*ibid.*: 64–65). In fact, for Bachir, child-soldiers (*petits soldats*) are children younger than himself. For these alone he narrates a process of recruitment involving terror, the murder of relatives, cannibalism, and the recklessness which results from confusing killing with play:

"Ces petits, ils ont trop peur parce que leurs chefs ils les font souffrir pour oblitérer vie facile d'avant. Quand ils rentrent dans la bataille pour la première fois, on dit: toi petit va achever rebelle blessé-là, et on lui donne un pistolet pour faire tacatacata. Après, on lave bien fort visage du petit avec le sang du rebelle blessé ou mort. Quand petit soldat, il apprend courage et devient farouche, là il peut tirer au bazooka facilement maman, tonton, cousin, muezzin et tout tout, croyez-moi fidèlement. Petit soldat, c'est trop trop danger tout le temps parce que il mélange le jeu et la bataille. Il mélange la vie et la mort avec un gros sourire sur son visage" (*ibid.*: 77).

As civil war ends, Bachir is demobilised and abandoned by the government, and has to take up criminal activities, such as extortion, to survive. Finally the worn out and lost adolescent, whose existence has lost every sense, is rescued by Harbi, who describes him as "un pauvre diable malmené par le troupeau d'animaux humains qui a tué et les miens et le pays tout

entier” (*ibid.*: 155), thus confirming the instrumental role of Bachir in signifying Djibouti’s present and absence of future. Whatever is to become of the country is again handed over to the former northern colonizer, whose domination over Africans ends up pessimistically reaffirmed as inevitable. This is not identical to the representations of the North as redeptor or as an endearing bosom of refuge—rather, as the contrary: neo-colonialist practices, including those which are camouflaged beneath refugee and asile actions, are denounced as even more violent and dehumanizing than colonialism, converting the whole of the Earth in a “terre sans promesse autre que celle de l’humiliation” (*ibid.*: 154). Yet, unlike Dongala, Waberi does not present an alternative other than a recovery of an idealized pre-colonial past<sup>17</sup>.

These four examples of representations of child-soldiers in the novel and film from the South are indeed enough to verify that some African authors not only understand the issue of children’s involvement in military conflict from a different perspective, but also that they react to its political appropriation by the North within an Africanist discourse that is intended to legitimate neo-colonial politics. The inversion in the treatment of context, with the displacement of the child-soldier from the centre of a narrative with a blank or stereotypical background to the margin of a *milieu* which is depicted in socio-political detail (however utopic, idealized or contradictory the proposed solutions for military conflicts in Africa may be), is a response to the tendency of the North to essentialize the black continent as savage and inferior (“Africains c’est pauvres et forts à la guerre, n’est-ce pas?” [*ibid.*: 77], says Bachir Benladen), thus erasing the real causes of the child-soldier issue. The portrait of the child-soldier, mostly adolescent boys, as distant from the notion of innocence, vulnerability, fragility and dependence, which neither demonizes children nor denies them the right to protection from violence, must too be understood within this wish to counter the common discourse from the North and bring about a more adequate response to specific situations, involving both the minors and their communities and a perception of childhood and war that is context specific.

### Incorporations into the Hegemonic Discourse

The efficacy of this counter-hegemonic discourse, however, cannot be limited. This is due not only to the fact that they are minority compared with the political, economic and mediatic power of the North, but also to

---

17. It is interesting to note that African women are absent in *Transit*, with the sole exception of the tiny episodic appearance of Abdo-Julien’s grandmother, as waiter of her husband and with no significance nor agency of her own. This is, of course, the opposite of Dongala’s novel, where they were protagonists of a future.

the fact that these African voices, who write or film more to non-Africans than to their own continent, are dependent on the literary and film market of the North<sup>18</sup>. Furthermore: even when there is a real concern about child-soldiers and other issues concerning Africa (which is probably the case among many documentary producers in the North, such as the above mentioned), the dominant framework of thought leads to a misreading of the questions raised by the African novels and films I analysed, and to a conversion of their message and aesthetic strategies of representation into the stereotypical lines of the hegemonic discourse. In order to demonstrate how this happens, again in literature and film, I will briefly cite only two examples: the first is a novel entitled *Beasts of No Nation* by Uzodinma Iweala (2005), a young writer of Nigerian descent, born in the US and a Harvard graduate in creative writing; the second is the film version of Dongala's novel by Jean-Stéphane Sauvaire (director) and Mathieu Kassowitz (producer), entitled *Johnny Mad Dog* (2008).

The title of Iweala's book is significant of an approach that opts both for the lack of contextual rigor ("no nation" other than a vague West Africa) and for the use of the innocent child/perpetrator ("beast") paradox, which cannot but be explained by the beastly savage nature of the *milieu*. Indeed, the author wishes to work out the child-soldier oxymoron common in the North by focussing on the individual and psychological level. Iweala chooses Agu, a very young boy soldier, not yet an adolescent, as narrator of his own story, in the first person, in the present tense and in a tone that appeals to emotion and excludes all forms of picaresque irony, though Iweala's models seems to have been Saro-Wiwa and Kourouma. The novel begins when Agu is abducted by rebel troops, and ends in the day he decides to escape and is rescued by a "white woman from America", thus showing a temporality similar to the above described humanitarian discourse. The only flashback describes the last days of Agu's peaceful and protected life with his family—one that again contrasts with the disrupted families of Kourouma's and Waberi's protagonists. The reader closely accompanies, sees and feels Agu's fear, hunger, pain, and dilemmas, as he struggles to survive, is raped, and kills. Though Iweala does not try to exempt his protagonist from the role of perpetrator, he insists on the fact that the child

18. In Portugal, African novels about child-soldiers are often presented in bookshops alongside other narratives not only about Africa but about the North's ultimate Others, such as the Arab Muslim world. In these shelves we find child-soldiers autobiographies, as well as other "True Lives" (this is the title of this section of books in Portuguese supermarkets) marked by extreme violence: victims of excision, genocide (Rwanda), rape, child marriage, polygamy, etc. The ensemble of these stories creates a stereotypical representation of the targets of Western imperialism as savage and in need of northern intervention, for the protection of their own children and women. This phenomenon should also be studied, not only the representations present in these books, but the market dynamics connected to them. An identical logic can probably be found in the film market.

was forced to kill and, thus, on the dimension of victimhood. The choice of an impuberal child is, of course, intentional in this perspective.

The author manages to credibly construct what an adult reader in the North would readily accept as the child's point of view: one that forcefully excludes reflection on the socio-political context; one whose time structure is simple and straightforward; one that is close to the body and avoids complicated abstract and ethical reflections; one that is poetic but uses a plain metaphorical repertoire from an environment known to the child; and one that requires a new language, a particular version of English, as would be spoken by someone immature and close to illiteracy. This language, however, reduces what in Saro-Wiwa and Kourouma is a post-colonial weapon against white supremacy to the expression of a certain African picturesque, of mental immaturity and of the loss of the basic right to education.

Iweala's portrait of the child-soldier is not without nuance, though. Indeed, Agu's lucidity, balance, and unshakeable consciousness of good and evil conflicts with the northern perception of childhood for they suppose an agency that the North denies the child and that Agu preserves. More than an instinct, survival represents the choice for the possibility of a future, and this, in turn, implies self-acceptance, coming to terms with the past, and with the only identity this past allowed the boy to build. Iweala converts the child-soldier paradox into a duality that tries to rescue the child from the abstract location of the northern discourse. Yet, he is incapable of avoiding the compassionate tear over Agu's astonishing maturity, the typical mourning for innocence prematurely lost, and the stereotypical statement that despite being a monster, Agu is still a vulnerable boy that deserves love as much as any other child. Moreover, in the end the child is rescued by a NGO from the North, which, like in northern child-soldiers' narratives, ends up functioning like a cry of help for intervention by the civilised world in a continent that cannot help itself.

Sauvaire's *Johnny Mad Dog*, does hardly more than convert an excellent novel into a bad motion picture, in which everything—from the plot to the notion of child-soldiering—becomes a very noisy and extremely violent chaos<sup>19</sup>. Indeed, the balance achieved by the double narrative point of view (Johnny's and Laokolé's) in the novel is lost in the film, for Laokolé's part is reduced to incomprehensible bits and pieces. The function of this character is indiscernible in the film, as stress is displaced to Johnny and his militia, played by juvenile actors who were themselves soldiers in Liberia.

---

19. The review of the film published by *The Independent* describes this chaos with the following words, which are most adequate: "At the very start, the film pitches us directly into confusion and frenzy so abruptly that we barely have time to register what's happening. Amid a cacophony of terrified screams and furious yelling, we begin to gather from the staccato-edited images that we're witnessing a raid by a squad of armed boys" (ROMNEY 2009). Yet, the reviewer evaluates them positively. My view is the opposite—confusion is so great that the sense of the sequences is barely discernible.

The directors explain that these actors were given freedom to play out their real experiences as child-soldiers. This is in itself socially and aesthetically interesting and might explain some changes between the novel and the script. Yet what strikes out, from my perspective, is that though Sauvaire does not hesitate to show child-soldiers as capable of enormous cruelty, including murder, looting, rape, this happens along the lines of the “innocent perpetrator paradox”, for he also includes typical motives of the northern representations, which were absent and are incongruous with the novel: for instance, child-soldiers being kidnapped and forced to kill members of their families, the preparation of battles with battle chants and brainwashing, cannibalism, cocaine being rubbed into cuts opened in the boys’ foreheads, or the dialogue between Johnny and his girlfriend Lovelita, which presents the motive of the nostalgia of the child-soldier for a family and a lost childhood. Sauvaire’s film not only contradicts Dongala’s perspective on young soldiers and African realities, but he also falls into the trap of the aesthetization of violence, which the novelist wanted to avoid, as he stated in the above mentioned interview. This aesthetization ends up confirming both the barbarism thesis in the presentation of Africa and the construction of childhood along the lines of the North. Indeed, it is not surprising that the film has been viewed here as an adequate portrait of both, one that supposedly excludes “European or American perspectives” confronting us directly and wholly with “Africa”. A review published in *The Independent* states:

“Yet, compare the film to well-meaning commercial fictions about African conflict—*Shooting Dogs* or *Hotel Rwanda*—and you can see that Johnny Mad Dog makes no concession to European or American perspectives. There are no white characters to keep the viewer company, no reassuring representatives of official sanity. Made with an African cast, and representing a wholly African experience, the film immerses us without protection in its world, rather than drop the subject cleanly packaged into our laps” (Romney 2009).

The confrontation between Sauvaire’s film and Dongala’s novel, seen through the lenses of such statements, makes evident how the resistant counter-discourse from the South is incorporated in and neutralized by the hegemonic northern discourse. This hegemony gains particular strength when Africans themselves, like Iweala, become their agents, lending the representations of Africa the value of truth that derives from the fact that they are speaking of and for their own cause.



The differences between child-soldiers’ representations from the North and the South clearly show how a northern construction of Africa has replaced Africa and the Africans and made them inexistent on the other side of an invisible abyssal line. The moral and affective value invested in a portrait



of the child-soldier built upon a northern notion of childhood as fragility and innocence are instrumental in reinforcing this discourse and, in turn, legitimizing imperial domination by the North over the South. The representations from the South are more ambiguous and leave many questions unsolved. However, in their wider variety and in their questioning of the neo-colonial stance of western stereotyped constructions, they are proof of the existence of a counter-hegemonic discourse that must be taken into account. It gives voice to different conceptions of children and their involvement in armed conflict, as well as of African societies and politics that have to be acknowledged as an important part of a resistant anti-colonialist African culture.

Furthermore: the existence of a southern counter-discourse solidly recommends that we add a critical reflection to how public awareness to the child-soldier issue is raised in the North. Indeed, what this visibility process, which is relevant and whose good intentions are possibly unquestionable, may be undertaking is the actual invisibility of African children, of their specific life paths and social roles, as well as of the contexts they evolve in—an invisibility that will render the social and political handling of the issue all the more complicated, if not impossible. Humanities have a role to play here. As Dongala (2003) states in an essay on the social sciences in Africa: “The representations of man or woman in society and the political, economic and social structures must take into account simultaneously all the myriad forces passing through them, in all their dynamics and complexity. Only the Humanities (I am thinking in particular of literature) and the social sciences are able to do this.”

*Faculty of Arts and Centre for Social Studies, University of Coimbra, Portugal.*

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

BEAH, I.

2008 *A Long Way Gone. Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* (London-New York: Harper Perennial).

BOYDEN, J.

2004 “Childhood and the Policy Makers: A Comparative Perspective on the Globalization of Childhood”, in A. JAMES & A. PROUT (eds.), *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood* (London-New York: Routledge Falmer): 190-229.

BRUSSIG, T.

2005 “Barbarische Kindheit”, *Der Spiegel*, July 2011, <<http://www.lost-children.de/presstexte/Spiegel.pdf>>.

## COALITION TO STOP THE USE OF CHILD-SOLDIERS

2013 <<http://www.child-soldiers.org>>.

COMAROFF, J. & COMAROFF, J.

2005 "Reflections on Youth from the Past to the Postcolony", in A. HONWANA & F. DE BOECK (eds.), *Makers & Breakers. Children and Youth in Postcolonial Africa* (Oxford: James Currey): 19-30.

DONGALA, E.

2002 *Johnny Chien Méchant* (Paris: Serpent à Plumes).

2003 "Clearing the Horizon: Science, Social Sciences and Africa", *Mots Pluriels* 24, <<http://www.arts.uwa.edu.au/MotsPluriels/MP2403ed2.html>>.

HONWANA, A.

2005 "Innocent & Guilty. Child-Soldiers as Interstitial & Tactical Agents", in A. HONWANA & F. DE BOECK (eds.), *op. cit.*: 31-52.

IWEALA, U.

2005 *Beasts of No Nation* (London: John Murray).

KIESLING, E.

2006 "Review of Rosen, David M., *Armies of the Young: Child Soldiers in War and Terrorism*", H-War, H-Net Reviews, January, <<http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11321>>.

KOUROUMA, A.

2000 *Allah n'est pas obligé* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil).

2004 *Quand on refuse on dit non* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil).

LEE, A. J.

2009 *Understanding and Addressing the Phenomenon of "Child-Soldiers": The Gap between the Global Humanitarian Discourse and the Local Understandings and Experiences of Young People's Military Recruitment* (University of Oxford: Refugee Studies Centre), Working Paper Series 52.

ROMNEY, J.

2009 "Review of *Johnny Mad Dog*, Jean-Stéphane Sauvaire", *The Independent online*, 25 October, <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/reviews/johnny-mad-dog-jeanstephane-sauvaire-97-mins-15-1808813.html>>.

ROSEN, D. M.

2005 *Armies of the Young. Child Soldiers in War and Terrorism* (New Brunswick-New Jersey-London: Rutgers UP).

2009 "The Child Soldier in Literature or How Johnny Tremain Became Johnny Mad Dog", in M. ABBENHUIS & S. BUTTSWORTH (eds.), *Restaging War in the Western World. Noncombatant Experiences, 1890-Today* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan): 109-127.

SANTOS DE SOUSA, B.

2007 "Para além do pensamento abissal: das linhas globais a uma ecologia de saberes", *Revista Crítica de Ciências Sociais* 78: 3-46.

SARO-WIWA, K.

2006 [1985] *Sozaboy. A Novel in Rotten English* (London: Longman).

SPIVAK, G. C.

1988 "Can the Subaltern Speak", in C. NELSON & L. GROSSBERG (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education): 271-313.

WABERI, A. A.

2003 *Transit* (Paris: Gallimard).

#### FILMOGRAPHY

ADUAKA, N.

2007 *Ezra* (DVD) (France: Cinefacto/Arte France), 103'.

AHADI, A. S. & STOLTZ, O.

2005 *Lost Children* (DVD), (Germany: Dreamer Joint Venture/Arte Deutschland/WDR), 93', <<http://www.lost-children.de>>.

MARGOLIN, F.

2004 *Les Petits Soldats* (DVD), screenplay by François Margolin-Guillaume Vincent (France: Arte France & Films du Rêve), 1:05.

SAUVAIRE, J.-S.

2008 *Johnny Mad Dog* (DVD), prod. Mathieu Kassowitz (France), 98'.

ZWICK, E. (DIR.)

2006 *Blood Diamond*, Screenplay Charles Leavitt (USA: Warner Bros), 2:23.

#### ABSTRACT

This article will comparatively examine representations of child-soldiers in literary and cinematographic works from the North and the South, using post-colonial theory in an attempt to ascertain which power politics might be at play in the dominant northern discursive construction of the issue, and which the focuses of resistance within a counter-discourse coming from the South are. I will also consider the way in which the southern counter-discourse and its strategies are being incorporated into the hegemonic main narrative.

## RÉSUMÉ

« *Combien de personnes as-tu tuées ?* » *Les enfants-soldats dans la littérature et le cinéma*. — Cet article présente une analyse comparative des représentations d'enfants-soldats dans des œuvres littéraires et cinématographiques du Nord et du Sud. La théorie postcoloniale sera utilisée pour essayer de découvrir, d'une part les enjeux de pouvoir présents dans la construction discursive dominante du Nord et, d'autre part, les points les plus importants d'un contre-discours résistant du Sud. Les modes d'incorporation du contre-discours du Sud et de ses stratégies au sein de la narration hégémonique du Nord seront aussi examinés.

Keywords/*Mots-clés*: Dongala, Iweala, Kourouma, Waberi, child-soldiers, film, literature, neo-colonialism/*Dongala, Iweala, Kourouma, Waberi, enfants-soldats, films, littérature, néo-colonialisme*.