

## **Introduction: Independent Children and their Fields of Relatedness**

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The idea of this Special Focus first came to us while we were carrying out fundamental research about children in two different countries and contexts in Southeast Asia. While Silvia Vignato was enquiring about children's rescue after the 2004 tsunami and the end of a 30-year long conflict in Aceh, Giuseppe Bolotta was in the slums of Bangkok, doing research with children connected to NGOs. In both cases, the young people we met were growing up outside their families, however these are defined, and raised in different institutions committed to leading children towards developing specific ideals of adulthood. For different reasons, these children had to acquire various degrees of independence from parental figures.

Owing to our common, albeit separated in time, first training as clinical psychologists, we were familiar with theories of child development stating that primary relationships, especially with the mother, play a fundamental role in children's and youth's development of a healthy "identity".<sup>1</sup> In their absence, for example according to ground-breaking psychiatrist Salman Akhtar (1984), a "syndrome of identity diffusion" might insurge, leading to a pathologic personality.

The children we met challenged much of our former knowledge. Firstly, they were raised within family structures, which could differ quite radically from the modern bourgeois ideal of the nuclear family postulated as universal by most Western psychology. Secondly, they showed that despite quite early separation from parents or other meaningful kin, and experiences of poverty and educational disadvantage, they were coping quite well – to the point of being able to make choices and behave independently. To our senses, their behaviour and talks testified of sharp social and emotional skills of

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1 In psychological literature, identity is traditionally defined as a unitary inner core of emotion and subjectivity that enables a person to have a coherent reflexive feeling and thinking of what she is and does (Erikson, 1968). Beyond common-sense considerations, theories specifically relating the child's development of a coherent sense of identity to primary relationships range from the positions of psychoanalysis (see for example child psychoanalyst Winnicott, 1964) to the theories of attachment first developed by Bowlby (1953).

adaptment to a variety of simultaneous environments of care, rather than a pathological personality and lack of a coherent identity.

This raised a range of questions. As anthropologists, we have learned to look into “the context” and value its variations and differences as key aspects of humanity. Was our seeing the children as doing well a blindness, a methodological limit? Did children only look as if they were well because our method of enquiry would not lead us beyond a certain understanding of a person’s inner configuration? Or was it a fact to be taken into consideration as relevant in itself, saying something on the kind of society that we were studying? It seemed that, when it came to children, anthropology as a discipline would not cross the line of social determinations in individual behaviour, in spite of the fundamental and very influential works in ethno-psychiatry and medical anthropology and ethnography of subjectivity (Ortner 2005, Quinn 2006, Biehl, Good and Kleinman 2007, Moore 2007). How a young human being builds her own cultural and relational world throughout differences and hardships seemed too difficult, and extraneous, a task for anthropology and its methodology, as we knew it. Yet, to make sense of the children’s apparent, extreme or relative independence, we were confronted with a number of general issues connecting the subjective experience of childhood as a time of self-formation<sup>2</sup> to its social and political constructs. More noticeably, we met children who showed critical awareness about both aspects of the question. And these were indeed anthropological themes.

Certainly, our general questioning is common in social studies of children. The tension between seeing the child as an actor or as cultural and social product is the foundation of contemporary cross-disciplinary childhood studies and different schools are inclined to find diverging theoretical and methodological solutions (James and Prout 1997, Scheper-Hughes and Sargent 1998, Alanen 2000, Levine 2003, Lancy 2008, Montgomery 2009, Allerton 2016). Several anthropologists have carried out cross-cultural studies on mother-child attachment and child-rearing (Leiderman et al 1977, Davis-Floyd and Sargent 1997, Levine and Norman 2001, Levine and New 2008, Quinn and Mageo 2013). Nevertheless, here we are not discussing, or not primarily, the variations on parent-child relationships, nor are we questioning its fundamental importance. We are specifically looking into the contents of a child’s process of growth when it happens outside her kinsgroup. We wonder where the children gain their strength for agency –

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2 We speak of self-formation both in a general acceptation of a process of learning and in a technical, psychological acceptation of “formation of the self”. In the articles of this Special Focus, authors sometimes opt for the less engaging anthropological idiom of “subjectivity”. As neither concept implies an assumption on structures of personality and/or pathological conditions, we stay with “self”. For a thorough analysis of the notion, see Bolotta’s article in this Special Focus.

for example, what constitutes the equivalent of primary relationships for them, how varied cultural models of primary relationships allow for viable solutions, what is not and cannot be accepted. We use ethnography in order to explain, or clarify and describe, independent children's affective and critical landmarks in the cultural and social contexts that they live in.

Throughout the six contributions of this Special Focus, the authors analyse a field of relatedness where institutions like orphanages, religious NGOs or rehabilitation centres, and peer groups, all encompassed within more general religious and political ideologies, interact with diversely structured families in the children's care and thus contribute to shaping the children's self-formation. We underline how the children themselves are active participants in the construction and appropriation of this relational field and how the choices that they make are politically shaped. More precisely, we focus on the cultural background that defines what a mother and a father are, which forcedly implies analysing some kinship principles and more general political and religious ideologies of family and gender. We also underline how the children's field of relatedness is constantly informed – in the cases presented by the articles of this Special Focus – by a condition of marginality and poverty, which cannot be treated separately.

Emerging literature on children living outside families mainly focuses on the lives of children who grow up in institutions or with peers in the street (Panter-Brick 2000, Beazley 2003, Burr 2006, Davies 2008, Fujimura 2003, Young 2003, Vignato 2014, Bolotta 2014, Stodulka 2016). Here, we present a range of variations between such extreme possibilities: children and youths who are both at home and with their peers, partly in institutions and partly within families, formerly in institutions and now standing by themselves or, finally, totally enclosed by an institution.

Before discussing the points that emerge as fundamental through the comparison of the ethnographies, a methodological note is needed. Ethnographies were carried out by the authors at different conditions and with different assumptions. Fernanda Rifiotis and Luca Jourdan rely on narrations of childhood. While deeply engaged with their fieldwork, both authors resignify their referents' stories of childhood through a historical and anthropological analysis of their context. Jourdan, more precisely, describes children through the adults they have become, which is an interesting, although biased, methodological approach. Giuseppe Bolotta, Irene Pochetti and Silvia Vignato, on the contrary, knit together a picture of a long but specific period that they spent interacting with the children that they approached. While in this framework the children's voices take a far larger space, the uncertainty of doing fieldwork with children – that they grow up so fast and unexpectedly – lingers in their accounts. Relating of a return to a former intensive fieldwork, Thomas Stodulka resorts to both approaches in the longitudinal analysis of a young man's life trajectory. He spans from the

moment of the boy's aggregation to a peer group to his exit from street life, thus accounting for a large variety of unpredictable life turns.

### The young and poor population of the South

All the authors in this Special Focus present ethnographies of poor children in the Global South. This was not our original plan but it so happened that we received hardly any proposals concerning the West, or the North.

Partly, there is the evidence of children being more numerous in the South to the point that they easily constitute a visible, critical mass. As Jourdan underlines for the whole of Africa through his extreme case study in Uganda, due to high fertility rates and the consequent demographic expansion, one just has many more children in the African population than in countries with different demographics. To a lesser extent, the same can be said for Mexico, Indonesia, Brazil, and Thailand: their population's age pyramid has a very large base<sup>3</sup>. At the same time, although poverty is certainly much more generalised and extreme in Uganda, the other four countries concerned by this Special Focus have large poor populations too, particularly in urban areas as described by Bolotta in Thailand, Pochetti in Mexico, and Stodulka in Indonesia. This sums up to many marginalised children living in the Global South and partly explains the researchers' interest.

Partly, though, the configuration of this Special Focus is also influenced by a global construction of the suffering, needy and poor child as a "victim", someone belonging to a less fortunate part of the planet or of the society whose deprived childhood deserves attention – the media's, state's, NGOs', as well as the researcher's (Boyden 1997, Bornstein 2011, Fassin 2013). Poor children exist throughout Western countries but they are not the target of extensive global fundraising and are not constructed into an icon of world poverty, or to a far lesser extent. All the authors describe contexts where poverty is the historical outcome of war and natural disasters and/or economic and political violence against ethnic and social groups in the lower classes. In all the essays, the children constitute an important resource for impoverished parents, families, and communities: they must play the game accordingly. In Bolotta's article, the "slum children" are a typical target of humanitarian intervention and thus benefit the whole community. In Vignato's essay, the Aceh post-tsunami international aid configuration sets the scene of children's care through and around a more traditional system of choranic schools, which is thus funded. Pochetti's account of Tijuana underlines the construction of the needy child as a particular class of "in-

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<sup>3</sup> The proportion of children and young people (aged 0-24) is 44.98 in Mexico, 42.45 in Indonesia, 39.22 in Brasil, and 31.65 in Thailand (*Index mundi* 2017).

corrigible” drug addict in a border city, which is the icon of illegality and social degradation, and describes the institutions that NGOs and the State put up in order to help them and thus, the whole degraded local society. In Stodulka’s essay, the “street children” are an acknowledged problematic large group in the city of Yogyakarta and in Indonesia at large, originating state policies of control, rescue and repression, which they constantly relate to. In Rifiots’ analysis of care leavers in Brazil, the society appropriates the neglected children through legalistic policies largely inspired by the transnational discourse of children’s rights.

As it has been repeatedly argued in other contexts (Gupta 2011, Roy and Crane 2015), in our cases too poverty is not a static context or an unfortunate economic condition but a dynamic process related to specific configurations of power. More important, it works as a socio-political category, which is produced, codified, and inscribed by different institutions and political agents into the lives of marginal children and their families. As such, it is a crucial object of analysis in all the articles of this Special Focus although specifically analysed only in some. We must then bear in mind that addressing this particular class of children, those who are relatively independent from their families, means considering policies of poverty governance such as social stigmatisation, victimisation and the fuelling of public fear, often matching more specific constructions such as the “ethnic poor”, the “immoral poor” or the “dangerous poor” (Farmer 2003, Fassin 2008). Depending on the institutions involved and the socio-political context, the poor children portrayed in this Special Focus will be seen as either “victims” to help or “social dangers” to subdue. They are an effective category in the governance of poverty.

### **Kinship structures and the normative family**

In studying children who grow up outside “their families” we are bound to be concerned with what their families look like and what to be inside or outside them can mean for both the children and their carers. Although this Special Focus is not a study of kinship principles, in its very definition it raises questions about kinship as the structuring ideology for families to be defined, symbolically inspired and practically enacted.

Vignato and Bolotta explicitly refer to matrifocal practices and some matrilinearity as a relevant feature in the children’s self-formation as independent and autonomous subjects. Rather than anomalous formations, woman-centred households in the slums of Bangkok translate into the urban context rural, pre-migration matrilineal practices, which are usually described in relation to the ethnic groups that most slum dwellers originate from. The fact that children are more solidly related to a maternal line than to a pa-

ternal one is not to be necessarily read as the fathers' dramatic abandonment of their offspring and spouse but as an urban reconfiguration which adapts traditional structures to new environmental, economic, and relational constraints. Similarly, in Aceh, Vignato sketches a landscape where a poor mother who separates from some of her children is seen as a responsible person who takes care of her family through a number of strategies, not as a weak parent who cannot cope with the hardships of post-catastrophe times in the absence of a man. Both authors underline that the women who own or control their house, poor as it might be, and their children gain strength from a historical tradition of entitlement. Consequently, the children acknowledge their status as legitimate and not as a source of suffering in itself, although it goes alongside hardships.

It is particularly interesting to compare these two Southeast Asian essays to Jourdan's study of Ugandan families, where a strong patriliney is the base for an often-violent patriarchy. In Uganda, Jourdan relates, a formerly radicated custom of polygyny seems to turn into a habit of "multipartnership" where men, disempowered by constant economic decline and increasing unemployment, rely on violence to re-affirm their gendered supremacy. Stepmother's violence against stepchildren, in turn, is read "as a form of rebellion against rigid social norms linked to patriarchy". The children's errance described in this context is dependent on their own mother's one. According to Jourdan, a lonely child who wanders in search of her mother while escaping a step-mother is a common sight in present day Uganda and is considered as an understandable figure of need.

In the two Southeast Asian contexts described by Bolotta and Vignato, by contrast, it appears that a child who looks after herself is not necessarily an abandoned or neglected child. Affective bonds with the parents, especially with the mother, can be reliable and positive in spite of distance or little direct care. In Indonesia, Stodulka too reports of a "street child" in Yogyakarta whose mental illness is finally handled by a cooperation among his biological family, his "peer-group family", and a religious leader.

The kinship and residential arrangements that are described in the essays by Bolotta, Vignato, and Stodulka are often read by both the state and aid agencies not as solutions to social and economic hardship but as the source of them. This, often discriminatory, judgment stems from a normative idea of nuclear family which nowadays permeates neo-liberal ideologies of middle class in these countries.<sup>4</sup> Although encrusted in different general and religious symbolologies in Thailand and Indonesia, the ideal parenthood within

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<sup>4</sup> Beyond Indonesia and Thailand, the strength of such ideology is overwhelming throughout the global South. Authors show its multiple roots in colonial discourses of civilisation, modernisation and development (Scheper-Hughes 1989, Bloch 2003, Herzfeld 2007).

the middle class nuclear family relies on a steady, constant presence of both mother and father in the child's everyday life, and fosters an individualised care. That the children spend comparatively more time with peers than parents, are raised by many caregivers, or are left to their own devices is then publicly viewed as a pathogenic and criminogenous deviation or, at least, as a great source of suffering.

For the same reasons, in the eyes of the state and development organisations, communal childcare seems a backward, rural and irresponsible habitus that steps in when the parents (particularly, the mother) cannot assume their role. Communal childcare, on the contrary, as described in the slums of Bangkok by Bolotta, is ascribed as much to residential arrangements as to parental, religiously informed, ethno-theories of strengthening the child through training her not to be too dependent on her mother. Vignato also relates about communal care of infants as she underlines that babies and infants are never left to the institutions, as "someone" always take care of them. Again, there is an ideology of childhood and child raising behind this, because children are felt as a community wealth. Taking a foster child, as is largely described in former literature on kinship, fosterage, and adoption too (Goody and Tambiah 1973, Goody 1982, Carsten 1991, 2004, Schrauwers 1999), is a common practice in Southeast Asia that does not necessarily imply adoption as the origin of a new filiation but as an enlargement and empowerment of the residential group, for good and for bad. Communal care also surfaces in Jourdan's ethnography where stray children are looked after by unknown women and neglected children by their half-siblings' mothers, as in the case of little Moses.

These considerations lead us to identify a field of relatedness, often organised across space and time, which works as a structuring affective and social environment through various notions and practices of kinship and childcare. This is not to imply that children do not need or value their parents. On the contrary, they are constantly at work to construct and reconstruct parents and kins with the affective, protective and often dominating characters they have at hand. In this self-care work, the children situate themselves actively within political agendas.

### **Multiple parental figures: attachment and deliverance**

Within the nuclear family ideology, variations on the father's and mother's ideal role are informed by a model of shared responsibility even in case of the parental couple's separation, as legal conceptions of divorce demonstrate. In the essays of this Special Focus, parents are an intermittent presence in the children's life. This is a core issue: although, as we have seen, the children do receive a certain amount of care, and although they might live in a social

environment where single parenthood, child transfers and communal care are the rule and not the exception, this situation does not reverberate in children's self-formation in neutral ways. Some of the children whose lives are presented in this Special Focus deploy a number of strategies to preserve their emotional bonds with their (differently configured) families. Others turn to different people and ideals. In the fields of relatedness inhabited by the children, indeed, caregivers other than parents might become additional figures of attachment and play an important role in determining the children's process of self-formation. Mostly, the children's institutionalisation and the multiplicity of their care environments enhance their ability to create and multiply, in both space and time, fictive kinship bonds with various "fathers", "mothers", "brothers", and "sisters".

Rifiotis tackles an aspect of this question directly: how do institutional care leavers conceive of their "faulty" parents, particularly their mothers? How do they elaborate an image of motherhood, which they can relate to? In her essay, she emphasises how a general well-grounded idea in Brazil, that "the mother is always the mother" – i.e. that the biological link needs to be acknowledged – is actively and consciously reworked when the young women leave childcare institutions and face independent choices. Her respondents call this active process of re-fabricating a viable figure of mother, both in an affective and in a social understanding, "a turning point in the game of kinship relations". They underline that biology is meaningful but needs reinforcement by other factors, money and material care being significant. Rifiotis highlights the inner struggle between dominant ideas of motherhood and alternative ones, and acknowledges that fathers are less involved in the reflexion about blood. One of her respondents looks for elective stepmothers, another one resignifies her stepfather to make it possible for her to be at a safe but not excessive distance from her mother. A third one moves away from her foster parents, who grant her money and support, to be able to incorporate both filiations. Rifiotis suggests that "affection" and "care" are decisive in her respondents' emotional and moral re-conceptualisations of proper parenthood. Non-biological caregivers who provide "affection" and "care" can substitute biological parents in daughters' subjective experience. Thus, they can come to be considered as if they have always been the "real parents". Yet, blood relationships remain ghostly presences in these by now adult womens' memories of childhood and the self.

Vignato describes the ambivalent figure of the strategic mother, who tries to preserve her children through separation, noticeably at remarriage. Although her children feel "dumped", they also know that this does not mean that they are abandoned by a "motherly" home and group. If they are mother's orphans, children's process of making sense of their condition of independence becomes more difficult and painful, as we can see in the ethnographic accounts: given the matrifocal characterisation of family in

contemporary Aceh, the mother's death often goes alongside a more general disruption of the whole kins' network. Moreover, as the institutions are conceived as "fatherly" places where children grow away from their "mothers", or their cajoled infancy, they do not provide a motherly, primary care for mothers' orphans.

A remarkable role can be played in the process of reworking parental figures by the carers whom the children meet and decide to identify with in institutions, as well as within peer-groups. Authors relate the role played by religious or semi-religious agents, mostly connected to religious rescue structures, although, not necessarily (we see in Stodulka's essay the important role played by an ordinary Islamic teacher in Yogyakarta). In Bolotta's article, Father Nicola, the Catholic priest in the slums of Bangkok, incarnates both an alternative ideology of fatherhood, rooted in a Christian egalitarian ideal, and the figure of a reliable carer as the leader of his NGO. The children conflate the two roles and consider him as a father, thus enacting a kind of spiritual kinship. This allows them to contrast the ethnic stigma that they, as urban poor in Bangkok, are exposed to within mainstream, state-supported royal Buddhism. Jesús, in Pochetti's account, is a less clearly defined religious leader, insofar as he derives his authority from the fact that he was, himself, an addicted child like his wards. The rehabilitation centre that he runs in Tijuana is not overtly religious but its configuration, inspired by the Alcoholic Anonymous (AA), considers God as a fundamental power in the rehabilitation process itself. Because "the example", as Pochetti shows, is a strategy of cure which promotes identification with the sober ones, Jesús is the designated figure of the one who has grown so much in the detox to be able to promote it.

There are of course deep differences between the modes of attachment that the two men provide the children with. While Nicola is inspired by an idea of fatherly God and by a theological-political construction of the ethnic poor's children as "God's beloved sons", Jesús, as Pochetti brilliantly details, presents himself as a sort of outgrown peer. Nevertheless, he is there for whole families of "incorrigible" children (one of the home's guests is brought there because his uncles had already been in the institution) and thus provides a steady figure of identification beyond the walls of the shelter. Both men allow the children to play with a fatherly model, which is also a political model of alternative masculinity. Nicola hugs poor children, generally behaving in a way that challenges Thai proper hierarchies of class, as well as mainstream, Thai, Buddhist ideals of fatherhood. Jesús' commitment and sobriety provides an alternative, although extreme, example of masculinity in a violent environment such as Tijuana. The children can internalise such models and use them to relate in new, original ways to their families and to the wider society, as both authors detail.

## **Institutions, deviance and the politics of childcare**

Institutions play an important role in the articles of this Special Focus. With the exception of the Ugandan case, and to various extents, all the children presented in the essays are identified by local and international, governmental and non-governmental stakeholders as in need of protection and/or correction. Partly, of course, this happens because children are intrinsically needy; but partly, too, because the children we describe here constitute a conceptual challenge and a practical denial of the global notion that the proper place for the “healthy and happy child” is in the nuclear family. Institutionalisation constitutes an important response to this challenge. In the essays, we see different institutions playing a major role in the independent children’s lives and survival: state-run structures of childcare (Rifiotis), orphanages and Islamic residential schools (Vignato), Catholic NGOs (Bolotta), international secular NGOs (Stodulka), and rehabilitation centres (Pochetti).

Ideologies of family and practices of childcare, as well as interpretations of poverty, children’s marginality, and education, vary considerably in the institutions that we consider here. Sometimes they match the families’, the local communities’ and the state’s conceptualisations of the same subjects and sometimes they diverge from them or are overtly against them. This plurality of moral constructions necessarily has a political dimension as it relates to the “futurity of childhood” (Jenks 1996, p.13) and to the conflicting cultural politics aimed at shaping children as responsible, future members of a desired society (Goddard et al 2005).

In Vignato’s and Pochetti’s essays, there is a certain convergence between the kind of work that the childcare institutions do and local society’s moral interpretation of children. Vignato shows how, in the case of post-tsunami and post-conflict Aceh, the category of “orphan” becomes a moral filter through which Acehnese society thinks and reworks both childhood at large and its own historical identity. The institutions that the author describes are an expression of this moral construction. This takes the shape of a delegated “fatherly” function whose task is to form children in reference to a pious Muslim ideal, within a matrilocal society where fatherless children are all but an exception. It is relevant to underline, as Vignato does, that the institutional categorisation of children as father orphans (*yatim*), despite its putative meaning, coexists with a range of different situations as most of the children have persistent affective ties with their motherly kinsgroup and sometimes also have a living father. It is well known in anthropology that institutional categorisations neglect children’s individual, class, and ethnic differences (Glauser 1997, Goodman 2000, Ennew and Swart-Kruiger 2003). Unlike in other contexts, though, in Aceh being categorised as a father orphan can also bring forward social advantages for both children

and their mothers or carers.

In Pochetti's article, we see rehabilitation centres, both state-run and NGO-based, reproducing a national and international rhetoric historically portraying the Mexican border city of Tijuana as the epitome of drugs dealing, violence and criminality. The condition of poor children, rather than being analysed as the outcome of deep socio-economic inequalities, is depoliticised and pathologised by both state and non-state actors as the result of youth's widespread drug abuse. Once placed in rehab centres, Tijuana's street children "become" drug addicts – regardless of their actual use of illicit substances. Pochetti underlines that in her case study, the apparatus deployed is what Goffman calls a "total institution" (Goffman, 1961). Secured by peer-to-peer reciprocal control, the internees' self-transformation is promoted through emotional narratives of past damnation in drugs abuse and present liberation in abstinence. Such approach is not a state-versus-society condition: public authorities often send children to rehab, so Pochetti reports, with their parents' full approval. The public representation of poverty and the institutional responses to it have been internalised by the children's families, to the point that the whole societal approach to street children is grounded on the lexicon of drugs.

Institutions, however, can also challenge both national and international dominant ideologies and policies on proper childcare. The Catholic NGO described by Bolotta in the slums of Bangkok provides the slum children with an alternative venue of socialisation and a strikingly different interpretation of their condition as poor ethnic subjects with respect to the stigmatising discourse of the Thai state. As Bolotta highlights, at the Saint Joseph Centre, children are exposed to a religiously shaped model of childcare that allows them to walk on new, subversive pathways of self-formation, against hegemonic Thai socio-political hierarchies.

In all the cases mentioned so far, children are not passive spectators but actively engage with the childcare discourses and practices that they encounter within institutions. They elaborate on them and use them to grow up, as we have seen in their efforts of kinning.

### **Peer groups: Stigma, integration, and strength**

Anthropological scholarship on friendship and peer cultures, in and outside institutional contexts, has been gaining momentum as it points to a fundamental dimension of children's and youth's social worlds (Corsaro 1992, James 1995, Adler and Adler 1998, Hirshfeld 2002, Maynard and Tovote 2010). For children who grow up outside their families, however, peer groups assume an importance which goes beyond the usual. Several authors contributing to this Special Focus tackle the subject.

Stodulka's article is entirely dedicated to peer groups for the street children of Yogyakarta. In his rich ethnography, he describes the initiation rituals, values, and norms that regulate membership in the homeless children's and young people's "street-related community". While exposure to mockery and physical violence works as a necessary liminal condition for newcomers to be accepted as part of the group, once their membership is acknowledged, children establish family-like affective bonds with their peers, within a community of solidarity that becomes the members' main socio-emotional horizon. In the slums of Bangkok, too, as Bolotta's article shows, friendship and peer-to-peer relationships assume a remarkable importance.

In both cases, peer-to-peer relationships are publicly discriminated against and become object of social stigma. The two authors underscore two different, yet complementary, dimensions of the process. Bolotta shows how, besides the mainstream global representation of street children as wild and uncultivated subjects, peer-to-peer relationships are a particular target of stigma and institutional correction as they embody a political threat to the primary attachment children are expected to form with parents, conceived in Thailand as politicised moral symbols of religious and state authority. Stodulka, in turn, illustrates that the street-related community of peers protects children from the very stigma that they are exposed to as street-children, and provides them with "emotional rewards" through group solidarity and a unifying ethos.

While Stodulka and Bolotta examine peer groups in informal contexts, Pochetti and Vignato analyse how these relationships emerge in the context of institutions. Peers and parity are officially at the base of the rehabilitation centre described by Pochetti. Once in the rehab, previous identity differences are all encompassed by the common actual status of drugs addict. What makes the difference is rather the advancement one reaches towards a sober condition of abstinence construed as liberation from the "hell" of a past, guilty and miserable self. Newcomers are entrusted with peers who have already achieved emancipation from drugs and expected to represent positive examples. At times, peers will provide emotional support; at others, they will rigidly confine one's individual expression to the institutional totalising pedagogy, which appears as the ultimate super-structure in control of peer-to-peer interactions. A group of peers does not necessarily mean a group of equals. Along the same lines, Vignato emphasises how, within charities for orphans and Islamic residential schools (*pesantren*) in Aceh, a system based on age organises relationships between younger and older children. This draws on an ideology of brotherhood/sisterhood, older/younger siblings (*kakak-adik*) which is acknowledged throughout the Indonesian *pesantren* system (Lukens-Bull 2001).

It is important to underline that in all the essays, peer groups are not substitutive of family ties and in many cases run parallel to all kinds of kinship

configurations. Children's relationship with their (many) "mothers" and "fathers", however these figures are conceptually and subjectively handled, remain a core reference when the children come to make sense of their self.

### **Children's multiple fields of relatedness**

It is important to wrap up what has so far been said in one last consideration. All the societies that have been examined in this Special Focus have agreed to extend the legal and cultural period of their children's childhood according to a same, global model of scholarised minor who does not have to substantially provide for herself. The children who do not fit the model, for all the reasons that we have mentioned in this introduction and that will be further detailed in the essays, grow up out of their legally defined childhood and at the margin of this central societal and productive model. The process takes years and shapes them deeply.

We have tried to show how they set up and elaborate a field of relatedness where typical figures of attachments like a parent or a close kin are actively reworked and often largely replaced by other characters. Whom they chose depends as much on local cultural and historical configurations as on state-controlled policies and interactions with other carers, such as religious residences or NGOs. This suggests that the affective ties that the children rely upon in the elaboration of their selves are not only vectors of psychological development but also micro-political formations embedded in inter-subjective and bodily patterns of interaction.

All the authors, with more or less explicit emphasis, point to the kind of subjectivity that the children develop while making sense of themselves through their own affective and practical strategies. Their growth is constantly including diverging and sometimes, incompatible positions. A God's beloved child plays an adult role when talking back and up to his elders. A young internee in a Mexican rehab centre takes the program as a path towards a better use of drugs. A mother's orphan shuns the importance of a mother's home. Their bodies are cared for in self-organised ways, which sometimes include violence or harshness and hunger while some other times call for a suspension of child-like expectancies such as hugs, treats and other forms of indulgence – not a renounce, though.

Stodulka relates of a street child who develops a psychiatric affliction, but he also shows that the young man's efforts to see himself as his mother's son, his peers' unjudged brother and as a pious Muslim, as well as a sick person, help him cope with his difficult situation. What Bolotta calls a hybrid self, the lively subjectivity that the children develop while growing up far from their families is as much made of imagined continuities as of sharp criticism before the clashing requests of the world.

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# **Stepchildren and Stepmothers: Ethnographic Reflections from Uganda**

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## **Abstract**

This article focuses on the relationship between stepmothers and stepchildren, based on field research carried out on two Ugandan families between 2016 and 2017. Both families considered are traditionally patrilineal, implying that in case of separation the father generally exercises guardianship over the children. As a result, his next wife or partner is responsible for the care of her husband's children from the previous marriage, as well as those born from the new union. In a context of high fertility rates and widespread poverty, this situation can entail an enormous workload and responsibility for the new bride, often leading to a problematic and confrontational relationship between her and the stepchildren. By collecting and analysing childhood memories from two women, one of whom also fostered her previous husband's children, the article attempts to shed light on the socio-cultural and economic forces that shape the relationship between stepmothers and stepchildren. The life stories considered in this article are ordinary stories in contemporary Uganda, and in no way do I aspire to generalise about the psychological consequences that these relationships can have on children.

**Keywords:** Stepmother, Stepchildren, Children, Uganda, Africa

By using a narrative approach focused on the analysis of life stories, this article explores the social forces that have structured the relationship between stepmothers and stepchildren in Uganda in recent decades. It is a neglected topic: in the past, anthropological literature on Uganda has focused mainly on the attachment style within the relationship between mothers and children from a culturalist perspective (Ainsworth 1967) and on the theme of fostering (Page 1989, Roscoe 1911)<sup>1</sup>. Nowadays, anthropologists mostly

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<sup>1</sup> Recent literature has emphasised the role of grandparents in fostering due to HIV epidemic (Kasedde et al. 2014, Mugisha et al. 2013, Seeley et al. 1993).

view children as social actors. Through their agency, they try to cope with local cultural codes as well as with human rights discourse, in urban and war settings, as in the paradigmatic cases of street children and child soldiers (Cheney 2007, Young 2003). However, developmentalist studies devoted to health and children's rights seem to prevail as these topics are particularly close to the concerns of the Ugandan government and the International Organizations (UNICEF 2014, UNICEF 2015, UNICEF & ODI 2015, USAID 2016).

However, I believe it is important to shed light on the relationship between stepmothers and stepchildren because Ugandan society, just like others all over Africa, is characterised by high instability in couples and families, due to frequent separations that lead to the formation of new couples, or to the death of one or both parents. Moreover, the widespread practice of fostering further contributes to children' high mobility in a context where traditional parental roles do not coincide strictly with biological motherhood and fatherhood, as in Western societies. As a result, according to the report of the Social Trends Institute (2017, p. 27), in 2011 only 56% of Ugandan children were living in a household with both biological parents.

The subjects considered here belong to the Baganda and Banyankole-Bafumbira ethnic groups, all of which are patrilineal. Therefore, in the event of divorce, the father is supposed to take care of the children, or at least has the authority to decide whom to entrust them to<sup>2</sup>. Nevertheless, these social norms, which have never been firm, are becoming increasingly untenable today. As I shall argue later in this paper, due to their changing economic role, men nowadays tend to neglect their children.

It is very common for separated men to quickly develop a relationship with a new partner, generally a woman who is younger than the previous one. The new female partner must, therefore, take care of the children from the man's previous relationship and often, in a country characterised by high fertility rates, ends up getting pregnant very soon thereafter, giving birth to additional children to also attend to. Thus, she has to bear both a heavy responsibilities and a huge workload, in a context characterised by widespread poverty. Moreover, the fathers are frequently absent, often migrating in search of work, and in any case, they scarcely participate in the daily management of their children. As a result, in many cases the relationship between stepmothers and stepchildren becomes problematic and characterised by violent attitudes on the part of the former and by rejection and resistance

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2 Actually, in many cases the mother takes care of the children after the separation. Moreover, as we shall see in the following examples, children are very mobile. In case of separation, for example, they may live for some years with the father and the stepmother and then they move and join their mother again.

on the part of the latter<sup>3</sup>.

To address this issue I will first focus briefly on changing family structures in contemporary Africa, particularly in Uganda. Then, I will outline the way the economic and social crisis has redefined the local concepts of masculinity. Family structures, far from being stable, are deeply affected by socio-economic dynamics, as well as by government policies. At the same time, the family is the social space that most influences the experience of childhood. For these reasons, in order to better frame my argument, it is important to touch upon the macro-transformations of contemporary African families; then I will turn to a more extensive microanalysis based on two case studies. I shall consider two life stories, i.e., the first-person narratives of two women who are now adult and have become mothers themselves. It is a reconstruction from their autobiographical memory, in which themes of violence and suffering are central. Moreover, the second woman also fostered her previous husband's child, who is currently 22 years of age, and she told me about this experience as well.

The use of decentralised points of view, both internal and external, aims at grappling with the phenomenon from different perspectives in order to account for its complexity, which inevitably can only be partially investigated here. Moreover, the subjects of this article are all people I have known for several years and with whom I have discussed their childhood on many occasions.

I am aware that the sample on which this article is based is limited, but this is still a preliminary work on a topic I'll explore more deeply in the future. My aim is to investigate social phenomena from a qualitative perspective, without overlooking the demographic data on the transformations of family structures in Africa and in Uganda that can give us a broader picture to better understand the issues analysed here. Besides, the two subjects, whose infancy and family lives are considered here, have been close friends of mine, for 3 and 9 years respectively. I think that our long-term relationship was a precondition to address delicate matters such as the relationships with their parents and their stepmothers that caused them deep suffering, which still influence their present lives. The necessity of an intimate relationship, obviously quite rare and more difficult to build, to address these topics can be a partial justification for the limited number of subjects with whom I carried out my ethnographic work.

The article has limitations, if only because of the impossibility to deal

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3 As I will present better later in the article, the tendency of men to pursue multiple female partnerships finds its roots in the current deep transformation of masculinity and consequently of gender relationships. Nevertheless, I think that present multiple partnerships, in a patrilineal society, presents some evident continuities with the co-wives system and polygyny. I am however, aware that additional historical and ethnographic research is needed in order for this assumption to be verified.

with representative samples and the lack of both qualitative and quantitative scientific literature on this specific topic. However, in my defense, I can only add that the stories narrated and analyzed here are absolutely “modal stories”, there is nothing exceptional in them and many of my Ugandan friends, who for obvious reasons do not appear in this article, lived through and spoke about very similar experiences.

## **Changes in family structure in Sub-Saharan Africa: the case of Uganda**

The family is an institution that performs, among other things, an economic function and is, therefore, at the heart of the strategies of production, reproduction, accumulation and consumption. For this reason, family structures are not stable, but change in relation to the political and economic dynamics within the society. These changes can often lead to a mismatch, sometimes quite conflicting, between the ideals of family in a given society, on one hand, and the concrete social practices in place on the other. For example, in Uganda, a growing number of mothers today are single and unmarried; however, despite their increasing presence in the social landscape, especially in urban contexts, there is a widespread tendency to judge them negatively (Social Trends Institute 2017, p. 56). This means that changes in family structures often take place in a context of tension between traditional forms, which often persist at least in the local moral conception of a family model that is considered upright and desirable, and the emerging family structures reflecting actual social changes taking place.

Before focusing on the transformations involving family structures in Africa, and Uganda in particular, dealing briefly on the broad demographic dynamics of the continent is in order (Ferry 2007). One of the most significant factors is the persistence of high fertility rates, ensuring that Africa is the continent with the highest population growth globally. The average fertility rate in Africa is 4.7 children per woman, a difference of over 90% from the global figure of 2.5 (UN 2015). Analysts mostly explain the persistence of high fertility as the result of a combination of factors: the persistence of a high infant mortality rate; strong cultural and social value attributed to children; poor use of contraceptives; early marriage and early pregnancies (Bigombe, Khadiagala 2003). There are certainly other factors that may contribute to the phenomenon, but these seem to be the main ones. However, it should be noted that there are marked differences within the continent and that Uganda, with a current fertility rate of 5.8 children per woman (Social Trends Institute 2017, p. 31), far exceeds the African average. Therefore, it is among the countries with the highest birth rate and the highest population growth in the world. In addition, there is

great variation in fertility within the country. The most obvious difference is between urban areas, with a fertility rate equal to 3.8, and rural ones, with the average of 6.8 children per woman (Uganda Bureau of Statistics and ICF International Inc. 2012, p. 59), a difference that is in line with global trends. Despite the high fertility and population growth in Sub-Saharan Africa, the region also seems to be moving towards a demographic transition. In fact, in many contexts the fertility rate is declining, although in Uganda the decline is slower than elsewhere. Nevertheless, it is likely that African countries will show different trends in demographic transitions (Canning, Sangeeta, Abdo, Yazbeck 2015).

This brings me to the main changes in family structure in contemporary Sub-Saharan Africa. First, the data indicates that there is a certain resilience in family structures. For example, polygyny persists in rural areas, although it is declining in urban ones. Nuclear families are expanding, but the extended family is still widespread, just as it is in Asia and South America, and seems to compensate for the frequent absence of one parent (Social Trends Institute 2014, p. 12). In South Africa, a country where male migration has historically influenced family structures and undermined couple stability, multi-generational families are common and the elderly, often the only ones with a guaranteed income related to some form of pension, have a central role in the domestic economy (Social Trends Institute 2017, p. 44). There, only 32% of the population under 18 live with both biological parents and as many as 33% live with neither parent. Although these statistics are quite out of line compared with the other African countries, from this point of view Uganda is the country that signs most closely with South Africa, as far as these figures are concerned. In Uganda, in fact, 20% of children live in family units where both parents are absent (Social Trends Institute 2017, p. 27). Another particularly significant figure, again for Uganda, is the percentage of births to unmarried women, which tops at 54% – by comparison, it is significant to consider that this figure in Italy stands at 29% and is the lowest among European countries (Social Trends Institute 2017, p. 32). One of the most significant phenomena to emerge in contemporary Africa is the rise in single motherhood, which can be a temporary condition, especially in urban contexts. As previously pointed out, single mothers are still barely accepted and partially stigmatised social subjects, in spite of their increasing presence in the continent. They are a predominantly urban phenomenon that cannot be simply associated to a process of women empowerment or emancipation: the data, in fact, shows that single mothers mostly belong to the poorest strata of the population (Antoine, Nanite-Iamio 1991; Bigombe, Khadiagala 2003; Garcia, Pence, Evans 2008; Jones 1999). In many cases, in a context where men tend to have multiple partners, scattered and often neglected children, it simply means that they are women who have been abandoned by their partner.

## Poverty, HIV and changing masculinity

It is certainly impossible to discuss issues of poverty and inequality in contemporary Africa in a comprehensive way in one paper. However, we do need to refer to these matters in order to better understand the recent changes in family structures. Since the 80's, many African countries were forced to adopt the Structural Adjustment Plans (SAP) imposed by World Bank (WB) and International Monetary Fund (IMF). These plans envisaged severe reduction in social spending, privatizations and liberalization of the markets, including the labour market. There seems to be no doubt about the disastrous social effects of these policies and children, as a social category, have been particularly affected. As Rene Loewenson summarised, "The evidence indicates that SAPs have been associated with increasing food insecurity and undernutrition, rising ill-health, and decreasing access to health care in the two-thirds or more of the population of African countries that already lives below poverty levels" (1993, p. 717). Since the 90's, globalization has generated dramatic contradictions (Ferguson 2006). Indeed, Africa is a grey area: despite the economic growth on the continent, data shows that income inequality has increased within African countries in the last decades (African Development Bank Group 2012). Since the end of the Cold War, the African continent is the region that has experienced the largest number of conflicts and political crises at the global level, accompanied by devastating social effects.

These historical processes have heavily affected family structures causing their drastic transformation. The profound change in the economic role of men within the family is significant phenomenon as far as this study is concerned. In my opinion, this transformation reveals an evident gap between the social representation of the roles of husband and father on one hand, and historical reality, i.e., the praxis associated to them, on the other. In fact, contemporary economic and social changes have left men with patriarchal ideology, but unemployment and low wages prevent them from continuing to serve as breadwinner for the family. This affects and diminishes the social value of men and, as a result, their self-esteem<sup>4</sup>. Consequently, men tend to regain their self-esteem and sense of masculinity by resorting to multiple-partner relationships and violent behaviour in an attempt to recover their own sense of masculinity and their power over women. (Silberschmidt 2001). This attitude, however, also exacerbates the precariousness of couples, resulting in a tendency for them to break up more easily. As a result, many children grow up without one or both parents. From this

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<sup>4</sup> In his work on eastern Uganda, David Kyaddondo (2008) has shown that the little money earned by his children can also affect fathers' self-esteem. While the mothers often appreciate children's contribution to the family's economy, fathers tend to perceive it as an act that highlights their incapacity to take care of the family.

point of view, the data on Uganda is quite striking; as I mentioned before, in 2011 the percentage of Ugandan children who live with both parents is only 56%; 24% live with only one parent and 20% with neither. According to these figures, after South Africa, Uganda is the African country with the largest percentage of children living without at least one of their biological parents (Social Trends Institute 2017, p. 27).

The HIV pandemic has also contributed to the increase in these figures. Uganda was one of the countries most affected by HIV, although in recent years, prevention campaigns have paid off, bringing the adult prevalence rate down to 7.1%. Prevalence has decreased but not in a linear manner, and AIDS is estimated to be the second leading cause of death among adolescents (UNICEF 2015, p. 3) and obviously, responsible for the rising number of children living without at least one parent.

Finally, I think that the instability of couples and the large number of children living without at least one parent are strictly related to the profound transformations in the economic role of men as well as changes of the ideals of masculinity. Robert Wyrod, in his study on HIV in Kampala, has framed this phenomenon as follows:

an ideology of male sexuality rooted in men's privileges of controlling sex and having multiple sexual partners; the multifaceted impact of precarious work and economic inequality on male sexuality; the intertwining of anxieties about women's rights and gender equality with masculine sexual privilege; and, most significantly, the limited effect the AIDS epidemic has had on re-making masculine sexual privilege (Wyrod 2016, p. 220).

### Naburya's childhood memories

Now I will focus on the recollections of two women that narrated their childhood experience to me<sup>5</sup>. The first one is Naburya, a Muganda who is now 19 years old. She lives in Konge, a suburb of Kampala, and has a one year old daughter, but her partner died recently in a car accident. She lives with her mother, her sister and the latter's two sons in a small house in Konge. I have known her for three years and in the past we have occasionally spoken about her childhood. I told her about my project to write an article on childhood in Uganda focusing on the relationship between stepmothers and stepchildren and she agreed to relate her experiences to me:

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5 I have used pseudonyms to protect the privacy of my interlocutors. All dialogues reported here were in English, since both my interlocutors are fluent in this language. In the transcripts, I decided to stay faithful to the orally delivered narration to minimise the gap with reality.

I was born in Junggo a village in Mpigi district. My father had already 2 daughters not with my mother, but from another woman. He had a girl with my mother before me. I was born twin. My two sisters, the first-born, grew up with my father, but when they were 15 the mother took them away. I never lived with them they could come to visit for a few days. My 2 sisters and I lived with my mother and father for five years. We were living in Entebbe, my mother was a businesswoman with a small shop selling vegetables and food. My father was very rough; he was beating us. If he found us by 7 pm that we did not t shower yet, he could beat us. If he didn't beat us he used to send us to bed without eating. But he never beat my mother.

My mother and father were not married but they separated when I was five years old. My mother got tired of my father, she didn't like his behaviour. She is the one who decided to leave. She left me and my sisters with my dad. We didn't know that my father had another woman outside. We saw her coming with 2 children, two boys, one was a baby and the other one was about 2 years old. They were the babies of my father. This stepmother was Burundian but she grew up in Uganda. Me and my sister had really bad time with this step mother. She could beat us; she could not give us food. One day me and my twin sister pooped in the bed and she forced us to eat the poo with the food. I will never forget this in my life. My father used to buy everything at home, we had no problem with food, but this woman could give us the leftover from last night. But she could give her kids bread. My father didn't know about this because he used to leave at 7 am every morning for work ,and from work he could go around to drink local drink like *marwa* and come back drunk late in the evening. She hated us so much because we were not her kids; that is how stepmothers behave. It is very difficult to find a good stepmother here in my country. One day my older sister got sick, she had wounds in the head, I don t know how to call it in English. It smells bad if you don't treat it and the pus comes out. My father left in the morning and told this stepmother to cook some herbs and put them on the wounds to wash. But this lady did not do it. My sister had fever and pain. When my father came back home he asked her if she had taken care of my sister. She said she forgot. After that, my father called my sister to see if it was true. He found out it was true and she was smelling and cry. This lady was in the bedroom and my father entered the bedroom and closed it and started beating her. He tied her ends with a rope and put her head in the iron circle of a wheel [wheel rim]. She shouted for help but no one could come because my father was very rough and people could fear him. After two days she was beaten she left with her two kids. During that time, no woman was at home, only our dad and us. After, we stayed alone like 2 months. Even we got tired to be beaten by our dad and we had to cook for ourselves. One day we, three of us, sat and decided to look for our mother. Our dad had told us to cook beans; we had a kitchen inside and one outside. We got firewood and put the beans on fire with too much fire and water and we collected our clothes. We tried to look around if anybody could see us but nobody saw us. Then we left but we were very dirty and we walked to Entebbe town on the street looking around for our mother.

Because we didn't know where she was, we just knew she was in Entebbe. We kept on walking, we saw a flat, and then we sat there in front of it. It started getting dark and one lady came out from that flat and asked us 'what are you doing here, where are you going at this time?' and we told her 'sorry madam we run away from home because our dad was torturing us. We are looking for our mum but we don't know where she is. She said 'you are very dirty and all your clothes are full of holes. Now I am going to help you. We kneeled down and we said thank you so much. But we didn't know how she was going to help us. She said 'bring your clothes I show you the garbage and you throw them. We took a shower and her housemaid helped us to shower because we were very dirty. They gave us some clothes because she had some kids. After that she gave us food and juice. We slept there. The next day in the morning we woke up, we took breakfast and she bought for us clothes. She said she was going to tell the local chairman to look for our mother. She did it and we told the name of our mother and her sister, that is how we found our mother. After 3 days they took us to our mother, she was very happy and she cried. After that, we stayed for some years with my mother, maybe three years. We never saw our father. Then our father came and picked us. The sister of my father had died and my father wanted us to go to the *olumbe* [a funeral ceremony during which the heirs are designated]. Our father took us to the village in the house of the sister who died. He said you are going to start studying from here and you not going back to your stupid mother, he used to say like that. My mother felt bad, but she had no choice because she could fear my father and whatever my father said it had to be done. We were 7 to eight years old. We started the village life and she took us to school. We had to work for our school fees. We had to go to the forest to get bundles of firewood for sale. We had to dig planting vegetables and sugar cane. And we were making charcoal, he taught us everything. We were missing my mother for many years. Our father could not allow her to come because he thought she could take us. And she also feared him. Our father was still beating us very much. He could come back drunk or find us that we didn't shower. He could quarrel and he had some sticks in his bedroom for beating us. He could give us also other punishments like kneeling down holding a block in each hand and then we had to walk on our knees.

We stayed with my father from 7 up to 14 years old. But one of my cousin took my twin sister to live with him and study from his village. She was I think 12. When I became 14 I told my father that I wanted to go to look for my mother. I was tired of the life there, being beaten and harsh punishments. My father let me go because he thought I was going to come back, I lied to him like that. By that time, I had finished my primary school. So I didn't know where my mother was exactly. But another relative told me that my mother was working with orphans in Nakulabye in Kampala. I wrote it on the paper and when I finished my exams, the next day, I left. But my father never gave me any transport.

I reached Kampala, it was my first time in Kampala. They left me at Nakulabye market and then I walked around asking people where orphanage was.

Then they directed me. When I reached there my mother was very happy to see me and she told her boss about me so they allow me to live there. Life there was better, the care was good and I felt so relaxed. After one year, I went to see my dad to tell him that now he had to allow me to go and I needed his blessing so I could go and stay happy. I told him I was going to study. This a tradition to leave your parents in a peaceful way. From then I never went back to the village and my twin sister also joined us.

### Irine's experience of childhood and motherhood

Irine defines herself a Munyankole. Nevertheless: ethnic categories are fluid, as are ethnic boundaries: in her case, the father is a Mufumbira, belonging to the Abagahe clan, and her mother a Munyankole.<sup>6</sup> She is now in her early forties and has two children by two different men. I have known her for nine years and we've had many opportunities to speak extensively about her childhood. When I asked her to tell me about her relationship with her step-mother, she shared two stories. The first one (1) is her childhood experience with two different stepmothers, since her father separated twice when she was a child. The second one (2) is her adult experience as a mother when, after she separated from her boyfriend, she decided to retrieve her child who was living with his paternal aunt. According to tradition, she had no right to her child, that is why she had to resort to deception to take him and then disappeared. After some years, once the relationship with the father had become peaceful again, she decided to foster another of his sons who was mistreated first by his stepmother and then by his paternal aunt.

I was born in Rukungiri, my father and my mam were married. But after seven years my father got another woman because my mother was giving birth only to girls and he wanted a boy. We were five sisters. One day he told my mother that he had found another woman who could give birth to a boy. My mother agreed, she had no choice, and so the other wife was staying in the farm in the village and we were living in town. My father used to stay with her during the weekend, the other days with my mother. One day he told my mother he wanted to introduce her to the new woman. We went to the farm, the whole family, and we had lunch together; it was Sunday. Another Sunday she came to see us and our house was very beautiful, not like the house in the farm. So, she went back and she told my father that she wanted to live in our house, not in the farm. After one month, my father asked my mam if she wanted to go to visit her family in her village in Bushenyi. She was happy to go there but when she went there she received a letter from my father that

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<sup>6</sup> The Bafumbira speak Rufumbira, a language similar to Runyarwanda and they live mainly in Kisoro district.

she should not come back home. She could not believe it and she came back home and she found the young woman in the house. We were all there, my father stood in front of the door and told her she could not stay there anymore. My mam tried to enter and my father beat her and chased her with a stick. She went away with her last kid who was 4 months old. I tried to follow her but she said to go back to our father because she did not even know where to go. And she went.

We stayed with our stepmother and she started torturing us and beating us. She was telling us that our father was an old man and she did not want to take care of us because we were not her kids. We were four sisters, she was already pregnant and she delivered a boy. She could send us to fetch the water, and in one hour we had to fetch 20 litres as a punishment. She used to beat us with the stick and to punish us she could refuse to give us food. I was 8 years old and my younger sister was 2 years old and she was peeing on herself and but that wife did not clean her. It was me to take care of my sister. My father was working in the city, in Entebbe, as a driver and he used to come home once a month. My stepmother chased us from the house because my two young sisters were peeing in the bed. We started staying in the store with the goats. We could sleep in the house only when my father was there. We could not tell him anything because she told us "if you tell something to your father I will kill you". But one day a friend of my father told him that my stepmother was mistreating us. When he asked us, we said it was not true because we were scared. So, one day my father found out that she had a boyfriend and he chased her and she left two children, a boy and a girl. The youngest was three months. I stayed with these kids and we started giving her goat milk. After two months we received another stepmother, my father got her from a nearby village. We made a party and we started another life. She was a drunkard woman, she used to go to work in the garden and after she used to drink in the bar. She did not cook, so it was me who was cooking. She was not beating us but it was difficult to live with her because she was not giving us the rules and she did not care about anything. We were not going to school and my father was never around. She could not buy anything and we were eating always the same food. She gave birth to a girl and one day my mother came looking for us. It was about 5 years we did not see her, she could not recognise us. The following day my mother asked my father if she could take her two youngest daughters because they were in bad condition, they were kwashiorkor, they had a big stomach with blond hair. My father agreed and my mother took them. After one year, she came back, she took me, and my sister and we all went to live with her.

I was 19 years old and I lived with my boyfriend for two years in Kampala, When I met him, after 2 months I was already pregnant. When my kid, Joseph, was 10 months, we separated because his sister did not like me and she told him to chase me. She wanted me to be her housemaid but I refused. I went away and he took my son to his sister. I looked for a job and I started working. I was missing my kid and I tried many times to see him but I could

not because the sister did not want. She did not like me and she did not like my tribe. After 4 months, I went there and I had bought a big chicken, a branch of banana and a sack of charcoal. I sent all these items to the sister where my son was living. So, they left the guy, who was carrying the things, to enter in the gate and they asked him who sent this. He said it was me and I was there outside. So, they let me inside and they allowed me to see my baby but he could not remember me. I had some biscuits, I give him and I hold him. From that time, I started to go there every week. One day Jospeh was sick, he was missing the mother, and they allowed me to take him to my home for the weekend. I brought him back after 3 days and I let him there. One day I asked them to give me Joseph for another weekend and they allowed. But the father didn't trust me because he thought I could steal the kid and he came to see where I was living. It was ok and after some days, I took him back. After I organised myself. My sister came from the village and I went to ask for my son again. They gave him to me and then the day after I gave the baby to my sister to take him to the village of my mother. I shifted from the house and I rented another house so the father could not find me. I saw him again [the father] after four years. My son was living in the village with my mother and I was going there often.

My boyfriend had already 2 kids from 2 different women but I didn't know. I knew it when I was already pregnant. Both women had been the housemaids of his sister, one after the other. When the sister realised that the brother had a relationship with the housemaids, she chased them but they were already pregnant. One girl came back with the kid after two years, she introduced the kid and she went back with him to the village. When he was 4 years, they brought him back and she left him in the house of the sister. But my ex-boyfriend had already married another woman and he took the kid to stay with his new wife. This stepmother started to mistreat the boy because he was not her kid. She was beating him, sometime she could not give him food and he had to fetch water the whole day. One day I went there because I was taking Joseph to see his father, it was lunchtime. I found the father and his wife eating in the dining and the boy was outside eating under the sun. I asked them: why are you treating this poor boy like that? The father told me the wife didn't want to eat with him on the same table. After I went to the aunt and I told her all the story, so she told him to take the boy to her place. He took the boy and he started living there, and he was going to school. During a holiday, I sent Joseph to the aunt to stay with his family and his brother. They stayed together for the holiday and Joseph came back. But he told me that his brother was like a slave in the house, he was not allowed to watch the TV, he was not supposed to have food before the others had finished their food, he was the one to fetch the water and to clean the house and the dishes. He was not supposed to sit on the sofa; he was supposed to seat on the floor and eat on the floor. When I heard this, I asked the father if Moses could come to my place for a weekend and he allowed but he came with us to see my house. After a weekend, I didn't take Moses back because he didn't want any more to go back. The father called me on the phone and I told him Moses wanted to

stay with me. So, the father said he was going to call the police but he didn't, so Moses stayed with me.

### **Violence, suffering and resilience**

These biographical memories reveal the way social forces shape childhood, which proves to be clearly a historical construct, as well as the personal and emotional dimensions of childhood experiences. At the same time, they demonstrate how the stepmother-stepchild relationship is raised as an important socio-cultural issue and woven into childhood memories

It is important to trace the social and historical background of the two stories. Naburya's childhood was spent in Mpigi district, a rural area west of Kampala, between the end of 90's and the beginning of 00's. Her family was quite poor and the father used to drink. She told me on another occasion that her father had served as a soldier and bodyguard to President Milton Obote. When Obote was overthrown, he lost his job and had to go back to his native village to work as a farmer. Despite the fact that he no longer had to move from his village in search of work, he was essentially an absent father and within the family had mainly an autocratic and punitive role (Naburya used to relate his violent behavior to the fact he had been a soldier). All his wives were submissive to his authority; nevertheless, they had the opportunity to leave him. As it often happens, Naburya's mother migrated to Kampala where she had more working opportunities and she could attain a more emancipated life. Her position in the urban area afforded her the opportunity to get her daughters back. Nevertheless, some years ago, she lost her jobs and tried unsuccessfully to run a small apparel shop. The competition in the informal economy of Kampala is high and condemns people to a precarious life. Nowadays, she depends on Naburya and is not entitled to a state pension. On her part, Naburya is overwhelmed by the responsibility to take care of the whole family. She works as a waitress in a bar, a precarious job with a very low salary (about \$50 a month). She confided to me that she has to prostitute herself occasionally since her salary is not enough.

Irine, on the other hand, belongs to a previous generation. Her father was quite wealthy but when president Obote took power for the second time in 1980, his political party, the Uganda People's Congress (UPC), and his government became openly anti-Rwandan. In that tense political situation, Irine's father, being a Mufumbira, was considered a Rwandan, so some UPC supporters pillaged Irine's house and stole all the cows. This deeply affected the family's finances and the father had to migrate to Entebbe, where he found a job as a driver for the Red Cross. Since then, his presence with the family was sporadic and after he divorced, his children grew up with the

stepmothers in a poor and violent environment. Irine and her sisters finally went back to live with their mother, where they found a better life. When she was 18 years old, Irine migrated to Kampala, where she had a baby but soon after she separated from her partner. She was unable to find a stable job in Kampala, but her current husband, with whom she has a child, works for a telephone company and their standard of living is decent.

Despite the differences between the two narratives, some surprising similarities arise, even in the use of words. The first issue that emerges clearly is the presence of violence in the family relationships. In contemporary Uganda, violence against children is apparently decreasing; nevertheless, it is still a problem highlighted by international organizations and the government. Violence is frequent both in the domestic space and in the public space; for example at school where teachers often inflict corporal punishment on students (Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children 2017). Both in its public and domestic dimensions, violence is often locally understood as a way to educate and discipline children. For example, beating a kid who wets the bed is generally seen as a way to educate him, since enuresis is frequently considered a voluntary act and a form of carelessness. At the household level, violence clearly exceeds its disciplinary function. Children are usually the weakest subjects in the family and they can become the target of adult frustrations. From this point of view, the relationship with their stepmothers takes place within a power hierarchy where children are usually at the bottom rung. In the case of Irine, for example, the father decided to leave his wife because she did not produce any male children (this is locally attributed to a woman's problem). As Irine pointed out to me later, her father married his second wife after an arrangement was made with her parents and she had no say in the matter. At the time, Irine's father was still quite wealthy and he paid a price of 22 cows for his new bride. Therefore, the bride was forced to live with an older man, whom she did not love, and she had to look after his children. In this situation, the violence against her stepchildren seems to be a kind of revenge committed by a weak subject, the stepmother, against even weaker subjects in a context in which her life is seriously curbed by social norms. Her stepchildren seem to become a sort of metonymy for her husband, whom she has difficulty opposing: in this sense, the stepmothers' violence is also a form of rebellion against rigid social norms linked to patriarchy. As both Irine and Naburya emphasised, such violence is locally attributed to the fact that the woman has to care for children who are not her own and are often a cause of conflict in the couple. The father tends to develop a protective attitude towards his children, while the woman can exert a silent and hidden violence. Consequently, the stepmothers are not subjects devoid of agency, although it is certainly restricted. Adultery and aggression against stepchildren take place in a narrow and hidden space of action – women can hardly rebel publicly – and a significant

change, such a separation, can hardly take place and requires a long time.

Women tend to challenge patriarchy by attempting to get their children back. Being usually vulnerable subjects, to succeed they may resort to deception, as in the case of Irine. Although the current Ugandan law protects women in case of separation and guarantees them the possibility to exercise the guardianship of their children, in real life the norms of patrilinearity often prevail, especially in rural areas. As a result, it is quite common that women, after a separation, may “abduct” their children from their partner under false pretenses. This “act of force” is more likely to happen when the woman finds herself in a stable economic situation, like Irine who found a job after her separation, strengthening her agency. To get her children back, the mother often needs the support and the complicity of her own family, a support that becomes quite important when she has a job that prevents her from caring full-time for her offspring. This form of complicity, from the woman’s family side, suggests that the rules of patriarchy are not rigid and somehow it is socially accepted for a woman to opt out without being necessarily stigmatised or socially isolated. Another theme that emerges strongly is the frequent absence of the father. Male migration from rural to urban areas is among the main causes of the absence. This also enforces men’s aptitude for having multiple partners. However, even when the father does not migrate, the daily care of children is predominantly a woman’s task; moreover, the older children too, usually girls, have to look after their younger siblings. The power of the father in the family seems to be inversely proportional to his involvement in the daily care of children. In the case of Naburya, the more constant presence of the father in the domestic space adds more violence to the violence already committed by the stepmother. In the case of Irine, the father has a more protective role, though his presence is occasional.

The experiences narrated here reveal a great deal of suffering in children’s lives. It is significant that both interlocutors use the word “torture” in their stories. In cases of separation, the rupture of the maternal bond is inevitably painful and traumatic (sometimes, such a break can be permanent; in other cases, such as the ones reported here; the relationship with the mother is reconstituted after a few years). Stepchildren are often the weak link in the family and consequently they are exposed to the risk of becoming the scapegoats for adults’ frustrations. In such a case, to talk about “agency” could be misleading since the risk is to underestimate the social forces that shape these experiences. Due to their weak position, I prefer to use the category of “residual agency” to define their capacity of resilience, escape, and sometimes rebellion<sup>7</sup>. Escaping in search of the mother, as in Naburya’s

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<sup>7</sup> Alcinda Honwana (2005), in her work on child-soldiers, used the concept of ‘tactical agency’, coined by Michel de Certeau (1980), in order to define the limited agency

case, is a common attempt to avoid suffering. The solidarity and support that children can receive during these attempts, from neighbors or people encountered during the flight, reveals a certain degree of social empathy towards them. In Uganda it is commonly understood that the relationships between stepmother and children can turn violent and cause suffering – many people experience it, thus explaining the solidarity and understanding towards children who flee their home in search of their mother. Another way for children to avoid suffering is to develop a privileged relationship with a protective adult. The mobility of children within the family networks can allow them to develop emotional relationships with different family members; this can also give them the possibility to link up and try to go live with a more affectionate and protective adult (as in the case of Moses).

## Conclusion

Childhood, especially in the Global South, is deeply affected and determined by political-economic structures as well as by everyday practices embedded in local cultures (Scheper-Hughes, Sargent 1998). In this article, I have tried to reveal the social forces that structure the relationship between stepmothers and stepchildren in contemporary Uganda. In the cases I analyzed, three main forces seem to emerge: 1) the political crisis that affected Uganda up to the mid of the 80's, 2) the current neoliberal course that exasperates uncertainty and precariousness, and 3) the sociocultural norms. In addition, I also considered changes in gender relationships and the crisis of masculinity, since both factors shape childhood experiences.

Nevertheless, there are some important clarifications that need to be made: in the cases analyzed here, the relationship between stepmothers and stepchildren involved violence, causing a lot of suffering. As I argued above, these cases are not rare, on the contrary, they are quite frequent. However, it goes without saying that such a relationship can be often absolutely affectionate and protective. This is to clarify that it is not my intention to generalise or to assert the inevitability of violence: my suggestion is that such a relationship is deeply structured by the social forces at play, such as the economic dynamics and the unequal power relations between genders.

Moreover, the cases considered here refer to childhood experiences that date back to the 80's, in the case of Irene, and to the early 00's in the case

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of weak subjects. I prefer to use the concept of 'residual agency' since the children described here live under the heavy yoke of adults, while child-soldiers can occasionally confront adults (especially civilians). In the case of street children, they can build a parallel society with a high degree of independence despite the hard constraints of their daily life.

of Naburya. In a sense they are “old stories”, since the family structures and relationships can change very quickly and the differences between generations can be huge. Therefore, in order to avoid providing a static view, this analysis should be considered as a “punctual attempt” to account for the fickle social forces that shape childhood experiences. For this reason, I want to conclude this article by identifying some topics for further research that could help us to shed more light on the evolution of the family structures and their impact on children’s lives. Numerous studies, for example, have shown that gender relationships in urban settings are continuously redefined (cfr. Antoine, Nanitelamio 1991; Bigombe, Khadiagala 2003; Silberschmidt 2001). Couples can eventually become more collaborative and develop more equal relationships, since in cities both partners tend to work. At the same time, however, the number of single mothers is increasing and this could be a symptom of a decrease in the economic power of men. Rural areas are obviously not static, even if family structures can be here more resilient. Anyway, the fluid dynamics between rural and urban areas need to be better understood, and new phenomena, such as a rise in female migration, should serve as a warning to avoid simplistic dichotomies. In addition, we must consider that gender relations and family structures, and consequently children, are deeply affected by public policies, which may have a big impact in providing and improving educational and health services. Although Uganda continues to present a high fertility rate, further research should better clarify the way that efforts to promote women’s literacy affects their fertility, redefining their reproductive strategies. Ultimately, the dynamics of the phenomena investigated here, which affect and shape children’s lives, require a multidimensional analysis, both synchronic and diachronic, as well an approach that can integrate qualitative and quantitative data in order to account for the complexity of their etiology.

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# **Upturning the Rules of the Game: How Young Women Care-Leavers Negotiate Independence through Kinship in Brazil**

FERNANDA RIFIOTIS\*

## **Abstract**

In this paper, I propose to reflect on the “independence” condition of five young “care-leavers” by analysing the ways in which they experience their affective ties of kinship. The analysis is based on an ethnography carried out between 2010 and 2013, in the south of Brazil, on the de-institutionalisation of young women who, under protective measures, lived part of their childhood and adolescence without a recognised family life. In addition to the possible impact of the institutionalisation experience on kinship relationships, such as the breaking of ties or rapprochement with family members, I intend to explore the ways in which these young women are “powerful agents in the negotiation of parentage.” By approaching kinship as a “negotiated transaction”, I intend to focus my analysis on the affective bonds that are relevant in the daily practices of these young women. Such “negotiated transactions” will be explored by discussing a process I have called “a turning point in the game of kinship relations”, inspired by a native expression.

**Keywords:** Care-Leavers, Kinship, De-institutionalisation, Agents, Affective Bonds

## **Introduction**

In this paper, I reflect on the “independent” status of five young “care-leavers” (Nicole, Nina, Olívia, Clarissa and Virgínia)<sup>1</sup> by analysing the ways in which they experience their affective kinship bonds. Beyond the possible effects of this experience of institutionalisation on kinship relationships, such as the breaking of ties or reconnection with family members, I intend to explore the ways in which these young women are “powerful agents of

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<sup>1</sup> As agreed during the fieldwork, the young women’s names as well as those of the other research subjects were changed.

negotiations of kinship” (Schrauwers 1999). The analysis is based on an ethnography carried out between 2010 and 2013 (Cruz 2004) in southern Brazil, which focused on the departure from state institutions of young people who, under measures of child protection<sup>2</sup>, lived part of their childhood and adolescence up outside their families. This research, involving the systematic observation of these individuals as well as in-depth interviews, was carried out with 14 young people (11 women and 3 men) who lived in urban areas in the municipalities of the states of Rio Grande do Sul and Santa Catarina. In reference to this paper, it is important to clarify that Olívia and Clarissa lived in Porto Alegre (capital of the State of Rio Grande do Sul), while Nicole, Clarissa and Virginia lived in working class and marginalised neighbourhoods of Florianópolis (capital of the State of Santa Catarina).

By approaching kinship as a “negotiated transaction”, I intend to focus my analysis on the affective bonds that are relevant in the daily practices of these young women (Schrauwers 1999). Such “negotiated transactions” will be explored by discussing a process which I have called “an upturn in the rules of the game of kinship relations”, inspired by a colloquial<sup>3</sup> expression. The “upturn” seeks to account for a reversal in the direction of parental relationships. Most importantly, it allows us to determine a “change of expectations” on the part of young women about what should constitute and strengthen such relationships, and the ways to forge kinship. By employing this expression, I also intend to take into consideration the changes in the young women’s positions with regards to the relationships they establish. In other words, the “upturning” inspires me to examine the way they see themselves and others in the process of building their kinship relationships.

To that end, I analyse how young women experience this process of un-

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2 According to the guidelines of the *Estatuto da Criança e do Adolescente* (ECA) [Brazilian Statute of the Child and Adolescent], in particular Article 98, institutional and family care is considered a protective measure and, as such, can be applied when children and adolescents have their rights violated (by omission of society or state), due to lack, omission or abuse of parents or guardians and on account of their conduct. Nowadays, removing minors from their family life for placement in foster care centres is a decision that can only be made by the *Justiça da Infância e da Juventude* (Court of Childhood and Youth), whose primary mission is to look out for “the best interest of the child and the adolescent” (Silva 2004).

3 The use of the expression “virada do jogo” (an upturn in the rules of the game) was inspired by one of Nicole’s reports. She is one of the young women who gives life to the ethnographic material analysed here. “Now the game was turned around,” she said, as a way to explain the change that has been made in her parental relationships after family reintegration. If, at first, such an expression seemed productive to think of Nicole’s specific experience, little by little it was possible to perceive that more than a change in the relationship between parents and children, it could give an analytical account of a wider phenomenon that was also present in the reports of the other young women, as I intend to detail throughout this paper.

doing of traditional categories of kinship (father, mother, “relative”), which is accompanied by a “change of expectations” regarding the elements and substance that should constitute and strengthen kinship relationships. Ultimately, this enables us to ponder on what blood relatedness is actually capable of accomplishing. This “upturn of the rules in the game of kinship relations” comes followed by the opening to other forms of connectedness or “relatedness” that stem from affection and choice (Carsten 2000, 2004). Such an opening also goes through a series of individual strategies so that in the absence of blood ties, adoptive mothers and fathers, or even close friends, can become “relatives.”

### **Young women care-leavers: constructing their independent status**

Nicole, Nina, Olívia, Clarissa and Virgínia are young women who, under child protection measures, were sent to shelters and/or foster homes, where they spent part of their childhood and/or adolescence away from a family life. Except for Nicole, who was reintegrated whilst still a minor and whose guardianship was restored to her family, all the others left foster care because they were reaching or had already reached legal age. They are young women who experienced physical and psychological violence within their respective family environments, but who were able to take control of their own lives. They learned to subvert the bureaucratic and abusive environments that enveloped them and, above all, they went in search of what they understood as “care.” They were able to “escape” in search of help, even from institutions such as the Child Protective Service<sup>4</sup>.

In Brazil, the experiences of these young girls are not exceptional. Although institutional care in the country is a measure that is exceptional and temporary (a duration of no more than two years), in 2010 the number of institutional foster care services reached 2,624, which represented about 36,929 institutionalised children and adolescents<sup>5</sup>. Of these, 61% main-

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4 The Child Protective Service (*Conselho Tutelar*, in Portuguese) is a public body created in the 1990's after the implementation of the Brazilian law “Brazilian Statute of the Child and Adolescent (ECA)”, with the main objective of ensuring compliance with the rights of children and adolescents.

5 Data presented based on the *Levantamento Nacional de Crianças e Adolescentes em Serviços de Acolhimento* (National Survey of Children and Adolescents in Foster Care Services), an initiative of the Ministry of Social Development and Fight against Hunger (MDS), carried out in partnership with the Centro Latino-Americano de Estudo de Violência e Saúde Jorge Careli (CLAVES) [Latin American Center for the Study of Violence and Health Jorge Careli]/Fiocruz. This study is made up of data pertaining to institutional and family care (SAI and Foster Family Programs/PFA, respectively). In this work, I have chosen to present only the data related to SAI, which include the following care categories: institutional care, halfway house, community foster home and village foster homes.

tained ties with their relatives. However, if on the one hand this statistic reveals an extended possibility of family reintegration, on the other hand the numbers related to the duration of institutionalisation generate ambiguity, since the maximum time of institutionalisation ranged from 16 months to 17 years. “Nonconformists” identified within family groups are the category that remain at the top of the list of reasons for entering into foster care. Poverty seems to continue to be referred to as “family neglect”, which ranks first (37%) in the reasons why children and adolescents enter institutional care services. After “neglect”, “drug addicted parents/guardians” (20.1%) and “abandonment” (19%) also appear.

This data makes it possible to outline, albeit briefly, the context of the emergence of the independent status of these young women “care leavers.” At this point, it must be clarified that I prefer to conceive independence as a condition that is constructed contingently and not as something given *a priori*. These young women are not yet independent, however they have the means to achieve it. In this perspective, independence is closely related to the potential for individual initiative of these young women, bearing in mind that “individual initiative” in this case is not held to be simply as “resistance” or a “result” of a process (Biehl 2016). To this end, it is necessary to consider both the negotiations with these realities and the limits they impose as well as the refusal to engage with the same realities. Recognising the potential of individual initiative of these young women allows us to discuss the idea of vulnerability generally associated with these individuals, especially in the context of care and protection policies. Thus, it would be possible to say that the independent status of these young women is revealed as they recognise their potential for individual initiative and their creative capacity.

In the case of the young women care leavers, the emergence of their independent status firstly depends on the parting from the traditional point of view regarding the experiences of these individuals. The experiences of “care leavers” in re-entering society are commonly perceived to be defined by the consequences that institutionalisation has imposed on their lives, a perception that perpetuates their condition of vulnerability and stigmatisation. However, my proposal is to reflect on the experiences of these young women and their independent status beyond institutionalisation and its effects. It is a question of how they invent new possibilities for their lives based on the ways they experience affective bonds of kinship in a context of departure from state institutions. In this sense, as opposed to thinking about the influence of institutionalisation on kinship relations, since such a perspective would point to an extension of these relations in time and space, I propose to analyse the process of “upturning the rules of the game of kinship relations.”

## **“The upturning of the rules” in kinship relations**

In breaking down the expression *virada do jogo* (“an upturn in the rules of the game”), it is possible to think that the “upturning” seeks to account for an inversion in the direction of parental relationships. Additionally, it allows establishing a “change of expectations on the part of the young women about what should constitute and strengthen such relations, and on the ways of “forging kinship” (Vignato 2014). Roy Wagner (2011) employs game (chess) metaphors in dealing with kinship terminologies, adding to the game analogies at the core of this article. Although I do not intend to detail the analogy between kinship and chess in this paper, I am interested in considering this idea of kinship as a game, that is, as a “strategy” used by individuals in the connections they establish. In dealing with strategy, it is interesting to think about how these young women become powerful agents in kinship negotiations (Schrauwers 1999).

By using such expressions, I also intend to address the changes in these young women’s positions in regards to the relationships they establish. That is, the “upturning” inspires me to discuss the way they see themselves and others in the process of building their kinship relationships. As such positions change, as in the game of chess, their perspectives on kinship terminologies (and the values attributed to them) and the substances/elements that keep individuals connected also change or are reversed. Thus, I intend to reflect on the ways through which the experiences of institutionalisation that had marked the childhood and adolescence of these young women, within a context of departure from these institutions, ultimately opened possibilities to other ways of being connected or “relatedness.”

The term “relatedness” provides an opening to the manner in which native languages view this “being in connection” (instead of starting with a well-defined concept of kinship). The term also allows some distancing from the pre-established and arbitrary dichotomy of social and biological factors upon which many anthropological studies had been based up until the 1970’s (Carsten 2000). However, even though the term “relatedness” is susceptible to many criticisms, as Carsten (2000) argues, some of these criticisms are very close to those made about kinship. This allows us to eliminate certain assumptions (especially in terms of what kinship is) and address these issues in a different way. It is, therefore, not a question of discarding the opposition between biological vs. social, nature vs. nurture, substance vs. code, but rather of examining (scrutinising the means of the ethnography of the individuals’ reports and practices) the ways in which people from different cultures distinguish between what is held to be pre-established and what is enacted through individual initiative. “What might be called biological and what might be called social, and the points at which they make such distinctions” (Carsten 2004, p.189).

At this point, the reflection proposed by Carsten can be expounded upon, based on dialogue with the Wagnerian dialectic, as the latter allows us to think that the two domains (that of the given or innate and that of the subjects on which individuals can exert control) are important in the construction of kinship relations. That is possible because each one of them can only exist by being elicited by the other, in an infinite series of reversals “of the figure-ground kind in which a figure and a background mutually influence each other.” Consequently, the invention of kinship, if one may say so, would be precisely in the manner that these two domains are represented and even subverted. It is precisely this possibility to subvert domains that seems to affect the practices and the reports of the young women. As I intend to show, if in certain contexts blood relatedness remains a given dimension (creating a series of set expectations about its potential to create social ties), in others it ends up being denatured as the inevitable place for the constitution of kinship relations. That is, the meanings of blood ties and parentage, for example, become contingent and variable.

### **What blood can do**

Nicole is a 17-year-old young woman, an only child, blonde haired who, as she says, “looks completely like her father.” She was born in Rio Grande do Sul and moved to Florianópolis with her parents when she was four years old. According to her, her mother wanted this change, but her father did not. “Things were going quite well back there in Rio Grande do Sul, but when we got here – it all got worse.” It was then, when she was nine, after a big fight between her parents that Nicole’s father left home. After her father left, the girl didn’t see him again. She alleges that her mother deprived her of this contact, especially after she went to live with her stepfather. “For many years, on my birthdays, I wanted so much for my dad to be there, but how could he be there if my mother deprived him of it? Also, my stepfather, as well, only made things worse.” She didn’t like her stepfather from the first day she met him, because, she says, he knew how to turn her life into “a real hell.” She never really talked about the reasons that led to her institutional care, although she has hinted at some of the problems she used to face. Unlike the other young women who participated in this research, Nicole remained in the foster home for only three months and 27 days, which, for her, felt as if they were many years.

For this young girl, reintegration came along with a kind of “upturn in the rules of the game” in parental relationships, since the young woman had to learn both to live away from her mother and to rejoin her father, with whom she had no contact for years yet, from that moment onwards, she would share the same home. “Now the game is upturned. Now I am with

my father and I do not know where my mother is. It is very difficult.” The “upturning” was accompanied by a denaturalisation of the idea that blood relatedness would be an inevitable place for the production of kinship relations. This denaturalisation was felt by the young woman as a “change of expectations” in relation to the assumption that blood relatedness must produce affection or that it necessarily carries the power capable of constituting and nourishing the father-daughter bond. Although Nicole is biologically related to her father, she no longer felt like his daughter. The substance that seemed to produce affection in her childhood seems to be insufficient to produce social bonds in a context of departure from a state institution, as the young woman observes:

Since I came to live in my father’s place I’m no longer the same person that I used to be with him. The first day I saw him I hugged him and everything, I cried, but it was just at that moment. Ever since I left my mother’s house, that they have separated, I do not feel like his daughter. I’m his only blood-and-paper daughter, because he’s my father, but I don’t have any daughterly love for him.

At this point, it is possible to think that other or even overlapping experiences have been added to blood relatedness, showing her that the ties created by birth or blood were not determining factors in themselves, that other values are “added on” to lifelong relationships throughout life (Lambert 2004). In that sense, blood relatedness functions as a prerequisite, but not as a determinant of the successful affirmation of parentage (Schrauwers 1999). If, on the one hand, reintegration was followed by the beginning of a new life together with the father and the reestablishment of the bonds that had remained temporarily in suspense, on the other hand it established the distancing from the mother, both because of a judicial<sup>6</sup> decision and the will of the young woman’s father. The father’s desire is for his daughter to obey the judge’s ruling and stay away from her mother. However, for the young woman, “a mother is a mother”, and however much she has “been up to no good”, this is a tie that remains, regardless of any court decision. There is no way she can disown the mother, since this bond will always be marked by care. As a daughter, she needs to take care of her mother: “So, how can I ignore my mother, she made me! I have respect for her, even if she abandoned me when I needed her most. What can I do? She’s my mother, isn’t she? You have to take care of your mother.”

When the young woman says “she made me”, she emphasises how much the question of filiation is fundamental to establish and keep this bond between

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<sup>6</sup> Due to the reasons that determined the institutional care of Nicole, the mother lost custody of her daughter and was prevented from approaching her by law.

mother and daughter. For the girl, nothing could overlap or be added to this bond, even with the “change of expectation” regarding the values associated with blood relatedness (such as caregiving). For her, the place of the mother not only remains, but must also be occupied solely by the person who is, in fact, her mother by blood relation. In this sense, the positions of kinship, for the girl, must be clearly delimited according to the relationships that are established by blood relatedness. The possible meanings associated with the terms of kinship are limited and leave no room for metaphors or invention (Wagner 2010).

The young woman also delimits the inevitable place of blood relatedness in kinship relations based on the impossibility of relation with the maternal relatives. Nicole says, at various times, that they don't like her for having the same blood as her father. “I have his [her father's] blood, it's because of that. If I were someone else's daughter, then I think they would give me more chances.” In this case, the change of expectation as to what “blood can do” is in the fact that blood, instead of producing closeness and affection, can eventually result in distancing, as it contaminates those who carry it or inherit it. The young woman, from the point of view of the maternal relatives, would have been contaminated by her father's blood and therefore was not acceptable by the family. In relation to the maternal relatives, blood is also part of what is pre-established, but it brings difference and the consequent estrangement, producing the impossibility of a relationship.

### **“Invented” kinship**

Even though in situations of departure from state institutions blood relatedness continues to unavoidably hold priority for some young women (as in the case of Nicole), for others this process is associated with an “invented” method of establishing kinship bonds. Even after reaching legal age, some young women experience adoption without actually being legally adopted.<sup>7</sup> This is what happened to Nina and Olívia.

Nina is a 22-year-old girl. With a carefree demeanor, she is always surrounded by friends and people she “can count on.” Nina was raised by her mother alone during much of her childhood, since her father abandoned her mother (Antonia) while she was still pregnant. However, at that time Nina's mother was not able to raise a daughter and thus she was sent, as an

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<sup>7</sup> The most important question is not whether it was an official adoption or not, but rather what that expression means for these young women. That is, both Nina and other young women employ the word “adoption”. Moreover, as Cardarello (2009, p. 195) points out, “adoption” has a great prestige among many social workers, which ends up feeding the maxim that “nothing is better than a family” (where it is implicit “foster family”, with good economic conditions).

infant, to foster care. After a month, her mother, afraid that Nina would be adopted, arranged a house to live in as well as a job to show that she could take care of her daughter. Nina stayed with her mother until she was nine years old, after which she went to live with her grandmother, who had raised her mother, for a year and a half. Mother and daughter were separated during this time in light of the girl's bad behaviour, not for financial reasons. "My mother could not stand me anymore, she said I was very nasty and drove her crazy, and that I was a pest." At first, Nina's mother thought of leaving her daughter with her grandmother: of abandoning her permanently. However, she changed her mind when she learned that her daughter had been beaten by her grandmother and locked in a room for days. After a year and a half, she went back to claim Nina and held guardianship until she was 14, when she eventually kicked her out of home.

During the four-year period of her institutional care (14-18 years), Nina developed expectations that her mother would come and claim her, just like the first time she was abandoned. "I thought that this time, after I left foster care, it was going to be the same way, she would end up giving up, but she did not give up..." There were other reasons this time, it was different, and other institutions and agents mediating her relationship with her mother. On the eve of leaving the foster home, a week before she was 18, a lawyer, Lena, who financially helped the care institution and visited the girls regularly, chose Nina as her daughter and took her to live with her. The young girl gained a new family and a different life from the one she was accustomed to: with money, a private school and no need to seek employment. At first, it seemed she had everything a young woman her age could wish for, but she did not adapt: she wanted her freedom. She eventually left the family home and went to live alone in a boarding house in downtown Porto Alegre. Even while maintaining contact with her "adoptive mother" (Lena), the desire to reestablish the bonds with her biological mother (Antônia) was still strong; after all, as she herself once said, "a mother is a mother, that's the truth." In Nina's case, it is possible to conceive at first glance that even if the girl had no relation to the biological mother and her "original environment", it is, "in fact, a phantom kinship they are keeping alive" (Vignato 2014).

The last time Nina spoke to her mother, her mother had asked her to "forget she existed." However, the desire to rediscover her "true mother"<sup>8</sup> was stated by the young woman in one of our conversations. At that time, I proposed that we go together to the address that she had for her mother. However, she did not accept the invitation, arguing that her mother would

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8 The oppositional relationship of "true mother" and "fake mother" was established by the young woman to differentiate the biological mother from the adoptive one. This was undone as soon as Nina gave up maintaining contact with the biological mother and began to consider the one that, until then, had been her adoptive mother as a true mother figure.

not receive her. In view of her refusal, I eventually suggested that I go alone and, depending on how the event unfolded, she could try to come afterwards. This opportunity seemed to open a new perspective, the possibility of a relationship after much silence, misunderstanding and sorrow.

Nina's mother smiled when I arrived at her apartment. I introduced myself and stated I had come looking for her at the request of her daughter. "My daughter? How did you find me here?" the woman replied, visibly upset. I explained that her daughter had found her address on the internet and had given it to me. "Come in," she said, in an annoyed tone of voice. "Wait a minute... I need to take care of him [probably Nina's younger brother]." I remained in the living room as she headed into the room with the boy, bemoaning the situation: "Why am I not surprised about Nina?" When she returned, she looked as upset as before. As a way of establishing some personal connection with her, I told her that Nina longed to meet her brother and live with her family. At that, the woman began to cry, she could barely speak, with tears streaming down her face. She got quite emotional when remembering all the hardships she had endured in order to stay together with her daughter. Unlike the experience she had with her mother, Antônia says she never abandoned her daughter and, on the contrary of what one might think in face of their separation, she and her daughter had a relationship.

My daughter was taken from my arms when she was three months old. They took her away from me because I didn't have the money to support her. I slept under bridges and under cars, but I always provided for her in everything she needed. I was also separated from my mother when I was a child, but the difference was that my mother abandoned me, and I never left my daughter. She and I had a relationship. I didn't have one with my mother; she was a stranger to me.

Even though she maintained her distance in the period of institutional care, Antônia says that she never left Nina in need of anything and that she always visited her. "I suffered from hunger, but I never let Nina be in need of anything. She is my daughter," she justifies, emphasising the bond established through blood relation and which, by itself, could justify her duty to care for her daughter. However, this lost its value as soon as the mother was obligated to pay her daughter's allowance during the period she was in foster care. "Nina took me to court, forcing me to pay her a pension, she stabbed me in the back. I almost got arrested twice because I didn't have the money to pay her." Antônia views any attempt by the daughter to return and ask for help in financial terms. In this respect, it is interesting to think of kinship as "a form of strategy" insofar as it can be triggered either when it is appropriate for the individuals (to secure relationships and the things that circulate through them) or as easily denied when this parental relationship

implies, in the case of Nina's mother, a financial loss (Wagner 2011). Additionally, it is important to analyse to what extent money establishes a polarity in terms of affection between Nina's mothers. If for the adoptive mother (Lena) care-giving involves providing monetary support, which strengthens the mother-daughter bond, for the biological mother (Antônia) money becomes a stumbling block for the relationship, resulting in separation.

At the end of my visit with Antônia, as I was returning back home, some scenes from our meeting came to my mind, especially those in which she tried to demonstrate that she had started a "new life" with her young son and partner. In the new life, her son, as she herself said, is her "reason to live", "her reason to smile." It was as if she tried to do things differently, as if she had been given a new chance to start over. It remained to be seen whether there was any place for her daughter in this fresh start. Contrary to what the young woman expected, however, the attempt to reconnect with her mother came together with the greatest frustration of her life. Not only did Antônia no longer want Nina around, but she also threatened<sup>9</sup> her, saying that she would file a police report if she insisted on disturbing her family. According to the young woman, her mother's attitude was most likely motivated by her new partner, and also by the fear of losing custody of her second child. For her, this could be the only explanation, but not a justification, for a mother not to want to be with her daughter.

The Nina's reports allow us to observe that blood relatedness, which until then had been an unavoidable prerequisite for the constitution of kinship (to the extent that it accentuates the distinction between "true mother" and "fake mother"), needs to have other values added to be maintained, such as affection and care as well as proximity. The absence of these elements would make the mother-daughter relationship susceptible to the changes and separation that happen over time. Time, according to Nina's experience, causes blood relatedness to lose its strength.

I wonder if after such a long time without seeing her I will not end up forgetting that she is my mother, forgetting the way she looks. I don't know if I would be able to, or whether it's possible, you know? I think that's what will happen, because I don't remember the way my father looks anymore.

That is, little by little, Nina realises that blood relatedness alone is not enough to sustain a relationship (by living together). Over time, she realises that kinship relationships and even the ideal of "maternal love" need other elements that enable connections to be made beyond blood relatedness. These elements need to be strengthened every day. There are ties that may very well

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<sup>9</sup> This message, in a threatening tone, was sent to my cell phone the night after my visit to Antônia.

overlap, as she will come to understand, to those constituted *a priori* by consanguinity. In light of all these events, she began to love the adoptive mother as a mother and, gradually, the difference between the mothers – “fake mother” (adoptive mother) and “true mother” (biological mother) – disappeared. “I know she’s the only person close to me, besides my friends. She is like my mother, she’s always helped me, and she cares about me.” It is important to notice, from Nina’s experience, that even after many ups and downs the mother does not lose her place within Nina’s morality. Even in the absence of the physical presence of the mother figure, due to various circumstances, “the value of this place is not lost” (Gregori 2000). Therefore, when Nina says that Lena is “like her mother”, it is the value of this place within her morality that she is referring to. That is, a place marked by the possibility of care, of getting help in difficult moments, as well as closeness and affection. Until then, these values only seemed to be achievable when associated with consanguinity. The relationship she has established with the adoptive mother allows her to re-configure the conventional values associated with blood relatedness, as well as providing her with an opening to connect in other ways.

The importance of the mother figure also appears in Olívia’s story. Olivia is a black, 23-year-old and extremely communicative. Olivia doesn’t know who her biological mother is because she grew up believing that her grandmother was her mother and her great-grandmother was her grandmother. Yet, this is not a central issue in her life, because she believes motherhood involves many more facets than simply having given birth. She says she has three mothers. The first mother is the owner of the day-care center where Olivia was sent shortly after leaving the first institution where she was in foster care; the second is the caretaker of one of the foster homes where she was received; and the third is the mother of a friend. The three of them fostered her at different times of her life and each played a crucial role in times of difficulty.

In the context of anthropological studies, the Olivia’s perspective is nothing new. It often appears in the reports of Fonseca (1998, 2009), in his reflections on the movement of children<sup>10</sup> in working-class neighbourhoods of Porto

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<sup>10</sup> In examining the theoretical and methodological interpretations of the expression “circulation of children”, it is possible to observe that in general terms and from the vantage point of complex societies it reveals the displacement of children, from an early age, from the their parents’ home to other spaces of care and cohabitation, such as the homes of extended family and even through a larger social network involving neighbourhoods, friends and even state agencies (such as foster care services of varying types). In social and legal systems within the English-speaking tradition, as Lallemand (1993) points out, there are two terms that refer to the circulation of children: adoption and fosterage. While in fosterage circulation does not imply a change of identity or even in geographical location, in adoption the transfer of the rights of the parent to the guardian is definitive and implies a change of status and even the child’s identity. According to Lallemand, the opposition between these two terms

Alegre-RS. What characterises Olívia's experience, however, is not the fact that she has three mothers, but rather that specific moment in the young woman's life when she acknowledged the three women to indeed be "mothers" and the reasons behind that perception. When Olívia talks about her mothers, she is not discussing different experiences of being cared for in her childhood. During her childhood, when Olívia found herself circulating through different foster care institutions, the possibility of "forming a family"<sup>11</sup> was not relevant to her (Lobo 2013). This concern only begins in her adolescence and remains in her adult life. For Olívia, it is no longer a question of "who raises and cares for her", but rather the people she knows she can "count on wherever she is."

The issue of blood relatedness, especially in the change of expectations surrounding values and the affective ties that it can produce, also mark Clarissa's kinship experiences, a white, 27-year-old. Very articulate, she told me, when we first met, that her life could be read as "a bestseller." As a child, she learned to take risks for the sake of a lifestyle other than the one she experienced in the family environment. Indeed, her institutional foster care experience was not an external intervention on her life story, but a choice of her own. "I left home on my own will. I went out on the streets because I wanted to, because I did not want to live at home with my mother anymore." She wished to escape her mother's abuse and exploitation, which forced her and her sister to panhandle to bankroll her mother's habits. The practice of panhandling became a form of control, bringing along with it every imaginable disciplinary rigour and whose guiding principle was to obtain as much productivity as possible. Panhandling triggered a series of other daily obligations which, when not met, would cause their mother to beat her. After her stepfather left home – a man who Clarissa recognises as her father – the mother-daughter relationship became even more complicated. Nonetheless, it still took her a week to gain courage and run away from home. While she was on the street she heard of Child Protective Services for the first time, and she went to ask for help to enter foster care.

During the foster care period, the head of the institution sometimes tried to encourage Clarissa and her mother to become closer, arguing that when Clarissa became a mother she would better understand what occurred. However, contrary to her expectations, when Clarissa had her first child she asserted that the business of being a mother is not simply an "affectionate love for family,"

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– which emerged from the 1969 publication of J. Goody's article – gradually gave rise to a conception of a continuum between these two notions, since it seems more productive that these conditions be merged on a case-by-case basis, taking into account the specificities of the society or the social segment studied.

11 According to Lobo (2013, p.65), this expression can assume two meanings: the first would be to strengthen and maintain the bonds of affinity and consanguinity, and the second, which I use currently, refers to the construction of kinship relations where they do not exist biologically.

but rather a financial issue. It was just when her mother most needed here, that Clarissa understood that “her mother’s place in her heart” had dried up:

When my daughter was born we went through financial problems; our arguments were motivated by financial reasons because she asked my husband for checks and did not pay them. Then she came into conflict with us because of money, because my husband did not want to lend her more money. Then she walked away.

The attitudes of Clarissa’s mother contributed to the deconstruction of a tie that, for the young woman, would be permanent and key to establish kinship relations: blood relatedness. Notwithstanding, in Clarissa’s view, from the moment this blood tie is broken, the very “cognatic love” that should be able to unite people of the same blood also weakens or even disappears. The highlight of this “turnaround” in the mother-daughter relationship is mainly due to the presence of money, or, more accurately, as Luna (2004) suggests, when the girl realises that the relationship between them starts to be measured in financial terms. Unlike the cognatic love, this relationship is devoid of mutual admiration, emotional ties and morality (Luna 2004, p. 132). In fact, whenever Clarissa had to mention her mother during all our conversations, she avoided calling her as such, choosing to say “my sister’s mother” or simply “that one.”

It is important to note that for both Clarissa and Nina the change of expectations associated with the power of blood relatedness is mainly due to the relationship between mother and daughter. When Clarissa says that she did not reconnect with her mother because the latter was “not born to be a mother”, she is assuming that the relationship between mother and daughter must be based on a mystique surrounding the mother-daughter bond and maternal love (Fonseca 2006). Just like in Nina and Nicole’s experiences, the idealisation of this bond is also recurrent in Clarissa’s reports. The three of them use the expression “a mother is a mother” in several moments of their reports and such reoccurrence conveys much more meaning than simply a “mother-daughter relationship” (Fonseca 2006). This relationship reveals ways through which these young women are formed as individuals. Hence, their expectations surrounding the mother-daughter bond, especially in regards to the concept of care-giving that is involved in this relationship, will be present in the relationship they seek to establish with their own children – in general, running counter to what they experienced in their respective childhoods. In their own personal ways, each one of them tries to overtly show how careful and motherly they are with her children.

However, if on the one hand this “upturning the rules” in kinship is usually marked by the deconstruction of the “naturalness of blood ties”, on the other hand this process opens up space for the recognition of “choice and

affection” as elements equally important in establishing such relationships. That is to say that leaving care institutions may lead to openness to other ways of connecting, allowing these young women themselves to become “the weavers of this ‘culture of relatedness’” (Vignato 2014). This is very evident in the story of Nina and Olívia, for whom this “openness” was accompanied by the experience of having more than one mother and in whom they can count on at all times. In other words, such help does not result from blood relatedness, but from choice. Olívia says she has three mothers chosen by her at different times in her life. The young woman is not concerned in establishing a hierarchy of “affection” among the three mothers. All of them are her mothers in the same way, with the same intensity. In this respect, Clarissa’s experience is somewhat closer to that of Nina and Olívia not because of her mother, but because of her father. If in a context of leaving a care institution the young woman’s reports are characterised by virtually denying the maternal figure, this place of the “maternal figure” will not be occupied again, as in the experience of the other two young women: there are no other mothers, but a father (the former partner of the young woman’s mother). A father with whom it is possible to establish “immense love of affection,” as Clarissa wishes to emphasise.

This paternal figure appeared while the young woman still lived with her mother, before she was admitted to foster care services, and little by little became the focus of what she understood as a “family.” Differently than her mother, Clarissa argues, her father never abandoned her, even though she is not his daughter. That is to say that the relation with the father is established and fed by this opposition to the young woman’s experience with her mother. Where there should be care and protection, since it was an unavoidable relationship characterised by blood relatedness, only abandonment (a major symbol of this rupture of the mother-daughter bond) remained. Conversely, care and the establishment of a “strong bond” emerged from where the young woman least expected: from a relationship marked by affection. Such a bond, which was not established by blood, but by affection, was enough for Clarissa to consider her stepfather as a father. Proof of that is that even suspecting that he could really be her biological father, she never wanted to take a paternity test to have formal evidence of what the coexistence had already shown her: “Regardless of a confirmation or not, he is my father. I never felt like looking for a biological father or anything like that.”

In a sense, the young woman also does not see the need for paternity testing (somewhat against the motivations that create increasing demand for such tests) because her conception of her family has been, to some extent, reconfigured due to the relationship she established with the father. It is not a matter of blood relatedness, but of knowing who the people that you can count on are, even in the most difficult situations. This means that for the young woman “there are no relationships with blood relatives” as if it was

impossible, as pointed by Sarti (1994, p. 91), “to establish the three fundamental obligations that make up the moral universe based on the principle of reciprocity”: give, receive and reciprocate.

In a context of leaving care institutions, according to Clarissa and Virgínia, kinship relationships are defined by the possibility of having someone you can count on. Virginia is a 27-year-old white girl of medium height and long black hair. The young woman left her mother's home at the age of 11. From that moment on, her life was always as follows: “leaving and returning.” She came to live at her aunt's house in Florianopolis to study, but this never happened. In addition to her aunt never letting her go to school, she was forced to do all the housework. It was in an attempt to flee her aunt's house, which was “very bad”, that at the age of 14 she was taken in to foster care for the first time. Virginia's experiences, including those in institutional care, were marked by comings and goings from her mother's home: whenever she did not fit in somewhere, it was for her mother's place that she would go back to, without ever staying long. However, the bonds between mother and daughter were strengthened as they began to be established upon the caring for their children, or, according to Lobo (2013), from the effective exercise of maternity. Virgínia's mother, who during the infancy of her children was unable to care for them for a period, today helps out in her daughters' home, taking care of her grandchildren and doing housework. In view of the number of the young woman's children (seven), Virgínia depends on her mother's support to be able to leave home once in a while. In view of the young woman's experience, it would be possible to both motherhood and parentage, which in principle are experienced as dyadic (mother-child) relationships, become a “triangular relationship” mediated by the actions of a third party (in this case, the maternal grandmother), which assumes a fundamental role in the construction of the meanings “of being a mother and of being a child” (Lobo 2013). Taking Lobo's proposal (2013) as inspiration, but simultaneously somewhat reversing it, it might be possible to say that this exercise of motherhood, which is only fully accomplished with the presence of two women so that one can raise and provide for a child, ends up producing this “turning point” in the consanguinity bonds between Virgínia and her mother.

## Final considerations

Throughout the article I have tried to reflect on the status of independence of young women care leavers based on the ways they experience their affective kinship bonds in a context of departure from state institutions. Such status of independence was revealed as the young women became agents in kinship negotiations. These negotiations, which “are ongoing and always

subject to review and failure,” have been described based on the problematisation of the process of “upturning the rules of game of kinship relations” (Schrauwers 1999, p.320).

One first aspect of this “upturn of the rules of the game” was related to what I called a “change of expectations” as to what should constitute and strengthen parental relationships and the ways of forging kinship. It was possible to observe that blood, as a shared substance, can establish hypothetically unbreakable bonds between relatives, but such bonds also carry moral imperatives that motivate individuals to act in specific ways (Schrauwers 1999). Thus, for some of the young women, blood lost its meaning (by different events) as the exclusive place for producing kinship relations. Such loss of meaning was felt as a real “change of expectations” about what blood relatedness is truly able to produce, especially in terms of affection. Nicole experienced this “change of expectations” in relation to her father, inasmuch as she can observe that even though she had her father’s blood, she no longer felt like his daughter. For her, blood relatedness had become insufficient to maintain a “connection” and create social ties. If on the one hand it deconstructs the myth of “daughterly love,” on the other hand it seems to be a more complex task to have the same attitude towards “maternal love.” The “maternal love” is pre-established and characterised by birth and, therefore, something that could not be changed by her individual initiative.

The “change of expectations” experienced by Nicole towards her father was also felt by Nina and Clarissa in relation to the maternal figure. Nina realised that blood relatedness, over time, could lose its dynamism and potential to nurture certain relationships. For Clarissa, blood relatedness not only lost the power to produce a “connection”, but could even be undone or dry up (in the sense of ceasing to produce affection). In Clarissa’s experience, the deconstruction of the “myth of maternal love” (Badinter 2011) was accompanied by an inversion of the maxim that “a mother is a mother” (as found in Nicole and Nina’s reports). As a way of minimising the importance of pre-established “natural” factors, this maxim is replaced by another: “she was not born to be a mother.”

Unlike Nicole, for whom blood relatedness remained inevitable, Nina, Clarissa, and Olívia changed this into “building kinship” from other elements. For these young women, leaving care institutions was also accompanied by what would be a second aspect of the “upturn”: openness to other forms of “relatedness” (Carsten 2000). For the three of them, kinship has become a matter of affection and choice: kin are those in whom one can count on. Thus, if for Nicole there are no other mothers (other than her biological mother), for Olívia it is truly possible to have three mothers. For Clarissa, it is possible to have a father, with whom she could establish a bond of “affective love,” whose value and intensity cannot be measured by a paternity test.

Another point that is part of this “upturn” is the inversion in the direction

of parental relationships, which I could observe in Virgínia's relationship with her mother. If during motherhood and adolescence the mother-daughter relationship ended up in the institutionalisation and the impossibility of her mother raising her, in the context of departure from the same state institutions her mother becomes fundamental to her own experience as a mother.

Finally, with the “upturn in the rules of the game of kinship relations” I attempted to show that simply thinking that foster care services result in the separation or bringing together of young women and their relatives does not tell the whole story. Rather, it is something more complex that involves the transformation of the individuals themselves and their own conceptions of what family is. Thus, every time they build on kinship relations to achieve new possibilities in life, the young women activate their individual potential and find possibilities to become independent individuals.

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# **"God's Beloved Sons": Religion, Attachment, and Children's Self-Formation in the Slums of Bangkok**

GIUSEPPE BOLOTTA\*

## **Abstract**

This article examines the relationship between religion, attachment, and children's self-formation with regard to children who were born in a slum of Bangkok, and raised as 'slum children' (*dek salam*) in a Catholic NGO, within a primarily Buddhist context. In moving between their home, school, and the NGO, these children are exposed to multiple – and divergent – models of care, which reflect specific religious and socio-political discourses on family, education, ethnicity, and urban poverty in Thailand. The article demonstrates that different forms of adult-child affective relationships represent the political outcome of historically situated relations of power that simultaneously provide *dek salam* with multiple possibilities of self-formation. While some of these confirm urban poor's socio-economic and moral subordination, others open up the space for critique and the constitution of a particular kind of political subjectivity in the shadow of the Thai state hegemonic structures.

**Keywords:** Children, Self, Attachment, Religious NGOs, Bangkok

Political violence, poverty, natural disasters, and migration have a deep impact on the ways social groups care about their youngest members<sup>1</sup>. A significant proportion of the world's children grow up outside a stable family environment, structure affective and kinship bonds with people others than their biological parents, form multiple attachments, and relate differently to caregivers in the elaboration of their self. Relevant examples include categories of marginal childhood such as 'left behind children', 'street children', 'child soldiers', 'child prostitutes' and the like (Beazley 2003, De Boeck and

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Honwana 2005, Rosen 2007, Montgomery 2001, Stodulka 2016). Within public action and policy making, there is often an intrinsic tension in the interpretation of these children that oscillates between victimisation and sanction, vulnerability and deviance: on one hand they are considered particularly at risk – and thus victimised – because of their distance from the supposedly universal model of ‘childhood’ as established by international discourses such as the children’s rights (Boyden 1997, Hanson and Nieuwenhuys 2013), on the other hand they are regarded with suspicion when this distance is construed as deviance from the norm of ‘the dependent child’. As a result, many of these children are targeted by ‘corrective’ educational measures and ‘protective’ aid intervention, supported by NGOs, or hosted in institutions of care as disadvantaged, not ‘properly attached’ or ‘too independent’ children. Religious aid organisations and charities, in particular, are historically at the forefront of humanitarian endeavours to address children’s marginality (Bornstein 2011, Vignato 2012, Bolotta, in press-a). In these institutions, educational goals and theories of child discomfort are framed in religious views of the world and the person that may conflict with both global ideologies of child development and local cultural understandings of child-rearing (and by extension social reproduction) (Dahl 2009, p. 28). While raised by differently positioned caregivers, disadvantaged children, for their part, are confronted with a variegated institutional apparatus that pluralises the discursive and emotional references they draw on in the elaboration of their self.

Based on ethnographic research in the poorest districts of Bangkok (Thailand), this article contributes to anthropological scholarship on attachment and self-formation by exploring the specific case of children (roughly aged 4 to 16) who were born in a Thai capital’s shantytown and are raised as ‘slum children’ (*dek salam*) in a Catholic NGO, within a primarily Buddhist context. Moving between their home and various institutions committed to protect-moralise *dek salam* in varying degrees, these children are taken care by adults in different ways. Instead of being involved in a dyadic relationship with a single caregiver, they are exposed to multiple – and divergent – models of care, which reflect specific religious and socio-political discourses on family, children’s education, ethnicity, and urban poverty in Thailand. Depending on the social stage they act on, the children make different uses of such discourses, constructing and deconstructing their hybrid self throughout the process.

After some theoretical considerations on children’s attachment and self-formation, I will begin my analysis of this particular case by describing practices of childcare in the slums of Bangkok, where local ethno-cultural theories of childhood, family configurations, and poor living conditions contribute to collective child-rearing and to *dek salam*’s relative autonomy from adults. I will discuss vernacular and public interpretations of such

practices of childcare and show how – especially within the context of schools – *dek salam*’s apparent independence from parents is denigrated by public officials as in contrast to Thai Buddhist morality and the normative socio-political hierarchy, and explained as the result of urban poor’s ‘inferior ethnicity’. Next, I will present the care environment slum children encounter once they move to humanitarian organisations such as the Saint Jacob Centre, the Catholic NGO where I first met them, focusing especially on the particular ‘religious attachment’ between slum children and Father Nicola<sup>2</sup>, the missionary at the head of the NGO. I will highlight the ways this overlaps or contrasts with adult-child relationships observed elsewhere, and how children negotiate diverging (un)attachments, their own (in)dependence, and the internalisation of specific socio-political and religious discourses of childhood and poverty in the cultural construction of their selves. It will finally become clear that the alternative venue of the Catholic charity and the affective bond with its radical priest led the children to experience their self in a way that is distinct from the stigmatised view of the ethnic poor promoted by the Thai state.

This analysis will demonstrate how unitary theories of attachment and self-formation are complicated by existing socio-economic, religious, and political frameworks that shape childhood. It will particularly show that different forms of adult-child affective relationship, and the associated institutional infrastructures, represent the political outcome of historically situated relations of power that simultaneously provide *dek salam* in Bangkok with multiple possibilities of self-formation. While some of these confirm urban poor’s socio-economic and moral subordination, others open up the space for critique and the constitution of a particular kind of political subjectivity in the shadow of the Thai state hegemonic structures.

## **Attachment and self-formation**

Modern psychology identifies in mother-infant relationships the fundamental precursor of children’s development and growth as humans. Especially within childcare and child welfare work, John Bowlby’s (1953) evolutionary theory of attachment is often an underlying element of dominant understandings of children’s dependency on their main caregiver. Its fundamental assumption is that children have a psychobiological need to maintain proximity to an “attachment figure”, especially the mother, and that a child’s experience of repeated patterns of interaction with a significant caregiver cause it to internalise and embody relational models that provide the tem-

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2 To protect the identity of my informants, all names of places and people throughout the article are pseudonyms.

plate for future emotional orientations, social relationships and sense of self. Children involved in a secure dyadic relationship with a responsive caregiver would accordingly develop a balanced self, that is to say an internally coherent and synthesised personal identity.

Anthropological research and cross-cultural investigation, however, have widely shown the ethnocentric (Western) character of these approaches to child development (Levine and Norman 2001, Levine 2003, Quinn and Mageo 2013). According to Quinn and Mageo (2013, p. 4) attachment theory has turned a specific, twentieth-century, “cultural ideal of parenthood – the attentive, supportive, stay-at-home middle-class mom – into a standard for all the world against which the practices and norms of a vast variety of people were [...] inappropriately judged”. Feminist scholars such as Callaghan and colleagues (2015, p. 255) have further argued that Western universalising claims such as attachment theory “constitute powerful discursive resources in regulating women and families, in marginalising working class and ethnic minority people, normalising western, middle-class family forms, and in pathologising people’s lives [...] particularly the lives of those who were not members of dominant social groups and classes”. Children’s attachments are shaped by precise cultural realities. They also have political qualities as children’s need to be taken care of might imply their subjection to caregivers’ specific ideas of social hierarchy and moral discourses on proper adult-child relationship (Butler 1997).

In the analysis of children’s self-formation<sup>3</sup> in and out of the slums of Bangkok I contrast unitary visions of attachment, joining the position of a number of anthropologists who have recently scrutinised subjectivity and processes of the self<sup>4</sup> in contexts of the Global South characterised by social suffering, state violence, and poverty (see e.g. Biehl, Good, and Kleinman 2007). These studies have shown that the individual self, far from being unitary, is multiple, hybrid, composed of conflicting representations of the self and the otherness. The self cannot be solely understood as an individual psychological reality as it is shaped by institutional processes, economic policies, socio-political inscriptions, and historical trajectories (Strauss 1997).

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<sup>3</sup> Unlike other scholars examining conceptions of the person in Thailand (see e.g. Cassaniti 2012), I do not use the term self only to refer to specific theories of the individual or to doctrinal debates such as, for example, disquisitions between Hindu teachings of the Self (*atta*) and Buddhist teachings of non-self (*anatta*). More fundamentally, I refer to human beings’ attribute of self-reflexivity and to the processes through which a subject is able to identify and think of herself/himself (Holland et al 1998, pp. 291-292). This processual definition of the self recognises variations in conceptions of the person, both across cultures and individuals (Spiro 1993).

<sup>4</sup> I use the term ‘self’, rather than related concepts such as ‘identity’ or ‘individual’, as the latter more easily subtend a modern (Western) idea of personality as an essentialised, unitary, static, and ‘internal’ reality.

As Holland et al have observed:

We can discern at least three interrelated components of a theoretical refiguring of the [...] self. First, culturally and socially constructed discourses and practices of the self are recognized as neither the “clothes” of a universally identical self nor the (static) elements of cultural molds into which the self is cast. Rather, [...] they are conceived as living tools of the self – as artifacts or media that figure the self constitutively, in open-ended ways. Second, [...] the self is treated as always embedded in (social) practice, and as itself a kind of practice. Third, “sites of the self”, the loci of self-production or self-processes, are recognized as plural (Holland et al 1998, p. 28).

As other categories of marginal childhood, children living in the slums of Bangkok are institutionalised as disadvantaged subjects in need of protection and/or correction. While relating to caregivers as diverse as parents, missionaries, teachers, and NGO social workers, they form multiple attachments, internalise politically divergent cultural discourses, and actively construct their hybrid self. The latter cannot be considered as aprioristically pathological. As we shall see, indeed, the plurality of these children’s attachments, and the multiplicity of their sense of self, are precisely the conditions allowing some of them the possibility to challenge their subordination within Thai religious, and socio-political power hierarchies.

## **Slum children’s independent self**

### ***Childcare in the slums of Bangkok***

The children I present in this article were born at Tuek Deang, one of the nearly 2000 slums of Bangkok<sup>5</sup> (BMA 2007), in Bang Sue district, north of the city, where I carried out field research beginning in 2009<sup>6</sup>. The marsh-

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5 The UN identifies a slum household “as a group of individuals living under the same roof in an urban area lacking one or more of the following: 1. Durable housing of a permanent nature that protects against extreme climate conditions. 2. Sufficient living space, which means not more than three people sharing the same room. 3. Easy access to safe water in sufficient amounts at an affordable price. 4. Access to adequate sanitation in the form of a private or public toilet shared by a reasonable amount of people. 5. Security of tenure that prevents forced evictions.” (UN-Habitat 2006).

6 This article is based on an eight-year (2009-2017) multi-situational ethnography of children living in the slums of Bangkok. Over this period, I spent approximately five months a year in Thailand for fieldwork. Through my experience of living together with the same group of ‘slum children’ in all the different locations constituting their social geography (the slum, schools, Buddhist temples, Catholic charities, NGOs venues), I have been able to analyse how children respond to the expectations of institutional contexts that interpret them in different ways.

like land, on top of which wooden and tin-plated houses lie, looks like sludge, winding through the sheds and the cement paths built in the 1980's by the metropolitan authorities in order to facilitate dwellers' mobility within the slum. Most of the houses are supplied with water and electricity; however, the sewers are filled with rubbish and waste materials and are a vehicle for often-severe illnesses and bacterial infections (Bolotta 2014, p. 109).

Most of Tuek Deang residents are ex-farmers with no formal education, originating from every region of Thailand, especially the ethnic minority areas of the North and the Northeast, where matrilineal family structures are relevant kinship configurations. For many, migration to the city was the only chance of survival in a country where the urban-rural gap remains a major problem, both economically and politically. As the capital breaks the promise of socioeconomic mobility for ethnic migrants and former peasants, the majority of slum dwellers end up being peddlers of every kind. A growing part of the slum informal economy is also supported by gambling, prostitution, and drug dealing. In contrast with the extended matrilineal family of the rural reality they come from, social and material degradation, uncertainty and poverty have transformed traditional families into fluid relationships that leave space to women-led households as prevalent configurations (Thorbek 1987, Mills 1999, Bolotta, in press-b). Apart from mothers, households very often include grandmothers, a large number of nephews, and foster children (*luk buntham*<sup>7</sup>) not biologically related to their main caregivers.

While the nuclear family model is becoming increasingly prevalent among the middle/upper classes in the Thai capital, child rearing in Bangkok slums follows vernacular rationales instead. At Tuek Deang, as in the ethnic areas of rural Thailand most slum dwellers migrated from, the care of young children is primarily communal. Children move from shack to shack cared for by the women of the neighbourhood, alternating in order to fit the individual needs. (Foster) mothers, grandmothers, sisters or neighbours cover newborns in baby wraps, worn on the back, or rock them mechanically on fabric hammocks precariously hung from the ceiling while continuing their usual housework. In the house, the ones who take care of the baby most are the siblings, even whilst still very young. Through these coordinated and

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<sup>7</sup> The term *luk buntham* (son acquired by merit) refers to practices of informal adoption or foster care, intended as a compassionate and praiseworthy action, which grants to foster parents the acquisition of karmic merits. A number of authors (see for example Goody and Tambiah 1973, Carsten 1991) have documented similar practices throughout Southeast Asia, particularly in rural contexts. According to these studies, it is common for children to be raised by non-biological parents, especially if the latter are too poor to take care of the offspring. Often, when families have many biological children into care, parents can decide to entrust some to families who do not have any.

collective activities, childcare is incorporated into daily routines.

This kind of parenting does not respond exclusively to the socioeconomic conditions of the context (material poverty, absence of the mother due to work reasons, high inter-familial birth-rate, etc.) but also to an idea of education that is formulated by some women in these terms: “It’s fundamental that children don’t attach themselves only to the mother (*tid mae*). They must not develop an exclusive dependence on the mother, but learn to socialise with everybody and with the environment”. It is possible to recognise in these words the convergence of a specific “parental ethno-theory” (Harkness and Super 1996). On one hand, it reflects memories of a rural sociality in which vis-à-vis relationships among individuals sharing a localised “cultural intimacy” (Herzfeld 1997) were supported by the communal management of the collectivity’s resources (including children). On the other, it answers to a Buddhist conception of attachment that identifies in it one of the fundamental *viaticum* to suffering. Such parental ethno-theory adapts perfectly to the contemporary characteristics of family in the slums, being a protective factor promoting the flexible attachment of the child to family and emotional configurations, which are precarious, uncertain, and, by necessity, scattered. It also shapes the children’s self within a social framework that is much wider and emotionally diverse than the mononuclear family, as the children develop multiple affective bonds within and outside their network of biological kin.

### ***Slum children’s autonomy***

Vernacular and rural practices of collective childcare leave children free to spend considerable time in each other company. In the maze of alleys that form the labyrinthine slum, young and older children run around barefoot, often scantily clad, independent and confident. During the first month of my stay at Tuek Deang, I would have been lost without them. It was the children that taught me, with a small degree of mockery, how to survive in the slum: small acts that were mammoth tasks for me. When a moped comes at breakneck speed, for example, it is necessary to go inside the nearest house without knocking. The alleys are extremely narrow. To avoid being run over, entering a house is necessary to make way for the coming vehicle. In the same way, I was taught to equip myself with a stick, especially at nightfall, in order to avoid stray dogs asserting their dominance. These are all automatic gestures that children make casually, which I instead had to train for, for a long time. Children normally engaged in activities more commonly considered for adults: taking care of younger siblings, collecting and recycling waste, selling food, even drug dealing. Dan, a 15-year-old boy, told me candidly: “Children are good in selling drugs because they are less subject to checks and run faster than grown-ups”. *Dek salam* did not appear

as ‘innocent children’ overly dependent on adults. When I had just arrived at Tuek Deang, I, the ‘adult’, needed instead to learn from the ‘children’ in order to move around in their world, the slum<sup>8</sup>.

*Dek salam*’s wider autonomy from adult caregivers was also reflected by the particular significance of friendships and the peer group, collective formations commonly labelled by public discourse as ‘gangs’. Despite the pejorative connotation given to this definition, for many children at Tuek Deang, the peer group represented an important emotional point of reference, an internally hierarchical social universe, deeply rooted in the territory, equipped with its own value system and slang. These peer-to-peer relationships define a relatively autonomous social realm where particular experiences of self take shape. In the absence of adults, the children feel the slum as a place free of formal rules, different from institutional contexts such as school and public environments, and characterised by ample areas of freedom that *dek salam* of both genders can benefit from. As Phud (10 years old) said: “There aren’t the rules that we have at school here. We are free to dress as we want, to run, and to play. Children living in the city, outside the slum, aren’t free as we are here”.

When in the presence of adults, however, children have to adjust their self-expressions to fit the role of *phu-noi* (small people) in relation to *phu-yai* (big people). The relationship with adults and the related role-dynamic between *phu-noi* and *phu-yai* constitutes yet another social space that produces children’s self. This assumes a peculiar characterisation in the slum, which is different from what observable in public contexts throughout Thailand, especially state schools, where *phu-noi/phu-yai* interactions are rigidly organised according to a set protocol established by the state.

## “Selfless small people”: The Thai good child

### *Children as small people, adults as big people*

In the slum, children’s affective interactions with adults and older peers are a local reinterpretation of the formal relationship between *phu-noi* and *phu-yai* as defined within orthodox Thai Buddhist society. To understand why the reinterpretation of this relationship in the slum is publicly stigmatised as a deviation from normative Buddhist morality and as a threat to Thai political order, a preliminary presentation of dominant religious and socio-po-

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<sup>8</sup> The children’s ‘autonomy’ in the slums of Bangkok finds trans-cultural validation in the anthropological literature about childhood. As underlined by David Lancy (2008), while in Western hyper-industrialised countries children are “infantilized” and childhood progressively and indefinitely lengthened, in several contexts of the Global South the temporal extension of childhood seems comparatively sensibly reduced.

litical discourses of childhood, parenthood, and children’s due attachment to parents in Thailand is required<sup>9</sup>.

Here is, for example, the content of a Buddhist prayer class for children that I attended in a Bangkok state school in 2013. The title of the prayer was “Children’s duties” (*nathi khong dek*):

Dad and mum are children’s Buddhist saints (*phraorahan*). Do not stand in front of your parents. Do not dare to make arguments with them. Before leaving, pay respect to your parents by prostrating yourself and *krab*<sup>10</sup>. Good children (*dek dee*) must be selfless and show gratitude (*khwamkathanyu*) to parents every day because, while at home, dad and mum are the same as monks (*phra*). While at home you are *phu-noi* and must consider dad and mum as *phu-yai* (Field notes, July 2013).

The relationships between *phu-noi* and *phu-yai* described in this prayer historically defines normative social, religious, and political organisation in Thailand. Within *sakdina*, the feudal system of pre-modern Siamese society, the term *phu-noi* was officially used to describe lower rank people or commoners with respect to nobility and higher rank (Chai-anan 1976). *Phu-noi* were considered as morally inferior subjects who must demonstrate selflessness, obedience, respect, and gratitude to *phu-yai*. As they are seen as having a higher karmic condition and provided with merit (*bun-barami*), *phu-yai* determine what is to be done while the person in the subordinate role is not expected to express any wishes. *Phu-noi* are not only children but also, more generally, anyone relating with big people (*phu-yai*). Children in relation to adults, laity to monks, the poor to the rich, as well as citizens to the state’s representatives, are *phu-noi* in relation to *phu-yai*. Kinship terminologies (*phil/nong*, elder brother/younger brother; *phol/luk*, father/son) are also inscribed into this status opposition, and used to reinforce social hierarchies even outside the family environment where individuals will address each other as kin according to rank and status (Bechstedt 2002, p. 242). *Phu-noi*, whatever their age, will often speak of themselves as *nu* (mouse<sup>11</sup>), a per-

9 The cultural concepts of family, parenthood, and childhood can acquire a fundamental political value as metaphors of authority, (in)dependence, and subjects’ attitudes towards political power (Goddard et al 2005). As the Thai case clearly shows, the language of kinship can productively be used in governance, channeled into the public realm (school education, public rituals, national celebrations, etc.), and eventually contribute to the ways children negotiate their multiple (un)attachments with significant others in the cultural elaboration of their self.

10 *Krab* is a gesture of respect normally performed in relation to monks by placing both palms onto the ground three times.

11 *Nu*: literally mouse, animal that, although occasionally consumed, would not be particularly pleasing to Thais. Tambiah (1969) suggested the possibility of an analogy between the smallest and most marginal animals and children.

sonal pronoun used by children to refer to themselves, when in relation to *phu-yai*. Subaltern in any relationship, children occupy the lowest position of the hierarchy (Bolotta 2014, p. 115).

In Thai monarchical and military “paternalism” (Thak 2007), if children represent the quintessential *phu-noi*, the King, often designated as *pho* (father) and *dhammaraja* (the embodiment of the Buddhist *dharma*) (Tambiah 1976), is the exemplary *phu-yai*. The relationship between *phu-noi* and *phu-yai*, just as the related conceptualisation of family, are historically charged with political meanings. If we consider children and parents as respectively symbolising citizens and authority, then we can fully appreciate the political implications of such a construction of childhood. The ‘Thai good child’, like the citizen, should be passively prone to welcome parents’ (state authority’s) superior benevolent knowledge and abilities. Only by doing so, each child-citizen will harmoniously fit the Thai socio-moral and political hierarchies. If parents are *phu-yai* at home, the king and the military are the nation’s *phu-yai* (Bolotta 2016).

In today’s militarised Thai society, these are pervasive discourses. Especially within state schools, children practice ethno-nationalistic rituals of hierarchy via top-down teaching methods and by learning moral lessons stressing their status of *phu-noi* and the importance of their selfless devotion to parents and, by extension, the nation’s *phu-yai*. In the schools that Tuek Deang children attend outside the slum, child-adult patterns of interaction follow this logic and require them to recognise teachers’ moral authority without complaint – exactly as defined by the Buddhist prayer mentioned above.

If in schools and other institutional contexts the hierarchical roles of *phu-noi* and *phu-yai* are formally established, adult-child relationships in the slum have divergent characteristics from the paradigm established by the Thai state, presenting features that are quite typical of the private domestic dimension and are broadly shared across Asia<sup>12</sup>. In the relationship between adults and children, for example, it is possible to recognise a certain amount of gratuitousness of affection and performative flexibility, which are totally absent in public environments, where interactional codes between *phu-noi* and *phu-yai* are fixed within official regulations connoting their mechanical, compulsory, and even martial nature.

At Tuek Deang, notwithstanding the respect due to *phu-yai* and the differential nature of children’s expressions in presence/absence of adults, the

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12 Similar patterns of adult-child relationship have been described across Asia and respond to a general cultural model of hierarchically ranked relationships, which departs from what is expected in middle-class urban environments, especially (but not only) in western countries. See, for example, Bambi Chapin’s analysis of attachment in rural Sri Lanka (Chapin 2013).

military characteristics of *phu-yai/phu-noi* hierarchic verticality fail: children do not manifest a systematic submission all the times that they interact with known adults such as parents, relatives or neighbours. They do not pay respect to adults with the *wai*<sup>13</sup> or *krab* every time they meet them, as they must do with teachers. Moreover, they can transgress their role as *phu-noi* through irony (for example gently mocking an adult, or using informal speech) without such ‘standard deviations’ being codified as serious violations of the order to be corrected through public punishment, even corporal (as happens at school). Children are also allowed a supervised experimentation of ‘adult roles’ that would be not only immoral but also unfeasible in public contexts, where the individual’s self-expression is expected to match, without margins for interpretation, the prescribed hierarchy. This is why, from the state’s perspective, slum children’s ‘deviant’ relationships with adults and emotional attachment to peers may constitute a danger to the Thai hierarchical “social body” (Aulino 2014).

### ***Ethnic stigmatisation of slum children’s independence***

Slum children are dangerously distant from the political and ethnic standard of the ‘Thai good child’. Their perceived wider autonomy from adults is considered as improper. When they relate to Thai teachers at school, therefore, they usually meet *phu-yai* looking down at them as moral deviations. A schoolteacher I interviewed, for example, explained: “Slum children come from very poor family environments. They are not taught to respect *phu-yai*. That’s why there is no such thing as society for them”. In schoolteachers’ discourse about *dek salam* it is also possible to recognise a marked denigration of the privileged relationship among peers. Within this discourse, the strong bonds between *dek salam* represent a threat to the primary attachment expected towards parents and family, which are moral politicised symbols of traditional authority. Social stigma is thus an important aspect of many Thai teachers’ cognitive and emotional attitudes towards *dek salam*.

The stigmatisation of ‘street children’ doesn’t represent an exclusively Thai mind-set (Schepers-Hughes 1992, Davies 2008). The street child represents the supreme symbol of the immoral, undisciplined, dangerous subject, deprived of a ‘natural childhood’. According to such analysis, school and a (nuclear) ‘healthy’ family – in contrast with the streets and peer group – emerge as necessary answers for the promotion of healthy and happy children (Bloch 2003). In Thailand, however, referring to slum children as a social danger acquires a specific ethnic direction: the deviance is ultimately

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13 The Thai greeting referred to as *wai* consists of a slight bow, with the palms pressed together in a prayer-like fashion. The *wai* has its origin in the Indic Anali Mudra and is present, in similar versions, in several Asian countries (Anuman 1963).

conceived as a moral violation of ‘Thai-ness’, the modern national identity, or “the proper Thai mode of being” (*qwham pen Thai*) (Connors 2003). *Dek salam* are specifically assimilated to what historian Thongchai Winichakul (2000) has defined the “Other within”, a concept used to refer to the position of ethno-linguistic minorities of Thailand in relation to the ideological elaboration of ‘Thai-ness’ during 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. The royalist military governments attempting to transform Siam in a modern nation-state (Thailand), indeed, have selectively connected to an essentialised construction of the central Thais’ ethno-cultural traits, concepts of modernity, civilisation and development, assuming ethnic minority groups as a contrastive model of humanity (the ‘Others’) to which refer in the construction of a collective ‘Us’. Through the discourses that proceed by classifying *dek salam* in opposition to the Thai model, *dek salam* do not speak central Thai properly, they are dangerous, immoral, spiritually incomplete, lacking on an intellectual level, dirty and undisciplined.

Bang Sue district development officers at Tuek Deang, with whom I spoke on several occasions, often acted as vectors of such representation. This associates “not good” (*mai dee*) children with some fundamental traits: the abuse of amphetamine pills; dependency on technology; uncontrolled and precocious sexuality; violence and criminal behaviour; lack of practice of Buddhism; aggregation in gangs, and above all, disrespect for *phu-yai*. In addition, media representations give *dek salam* specific aesthetic connotations that present deviant children with a darker complexion, ‘messy’ hair, flashy tattoos and a ‘non-Thai’ dialectal lingo: phenomena associated with all the *phu-noi* of the country, and especially to children from north-eastern and northern rural areas (*dek ban nok*), ethnic children from the northern mountains (*dek chao khaw*), poor children (*dek chon*) and, indeed, *dek salam*.

Slum children’s lower adherence to formal hierarchies of seniority is ultimately explained by state officials and teachers as linked to their parents’ ‘immoral’ care giving, which, at the same time, is seen as a consequence of slum dwellers’ ‘backward’ ethnic traditions: parents are irresponsible, thoughtless or they ignore the ‘correct’ ways to build relationships with children<sup>14</sup>. Such explanations reinforce the state rhetoric identifying in slum inhabitants a social danger, this way legitimising the necessity of corrective governmental intervention. The latter will try to restore ‘Thai-ness’ by prescribing a new and superior model of Buddhist parenthood, namely the *phu-yai* cult related to the nation’s father, the King. Outside the slum, in particular at school, discrimination against slum children might thus restitute to *dek salam* an

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14 The criminalisation of slums (and slum dwellers) as ethnic spaces invisible to the state surveillance, potentially subversive because outside of the *panopticon*, represents the main rhetoric strategy used transversely by numerous regimes in the Global South to justify massive eviction campaigns (Davis 2006, p. 108).

image of themselves as inferior and rejected ethnic subjects.

The state, however, is not the only institutional actor involved in these children’s lives. Since the 1970’s, the advent of NGOs and transnational discourse of children’s rights in the slums of Bangkok added to the public representation of *dek salam* as social danger the image of ‘victims’ whose rights must be defended. Charitable organisations led by Christian missionaries and socially engaged Buddhist monks, in particular, have been playing a prominent role in pluralising the models of care for *dek salam*. In these organisations, children’s care and education respond to specific religious theories that can reinforce or challenge the stigmatising discourse of the state. In the following section, I will examine the particular case of the Saint Jacob Centre, a Catholic NGO dealing with some children at Tuek Deang, and show how the kind of care the children receive here embodies religious interpretations of ethnicity and urban poverty that subvert the Buddhist discourse of the Thai state. By means of a few exemplar ethnographical cases, I will then shed light on how collective practices of childcare in the slum, politically inflected discourses of the family at school, and the Catholic NGO’s religious approach, converge in distinct ways to shape the self among the children.

## **Slum children as God’s beloved sons**

### ***Saint Jacob Centre***

Saint Jacob Centre is a Catholic NGO in Bangkok, which provides residential care, scholastic support, and ‘spiritual formation’ to about 90 *dek salam* from five to eighteen years old. Many of the children hosted at Saint Jacob’s are orphans, foster children, or have lived in the slums outside a standard family environment. Father Nicola, 72 years old, an Italian Catholic missionary in Thailand since 1978, is head of the NGO. He belongs to a new generation of missionaries who were sent to Southeast Asia after the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) to support the growth of the indigenous churches and to carry on humanitarian interventions based on a vision of Christian charity.

Father Nicola’s evangelical orientation was influenced by liberation theology, once marginalised as a Marxist deviation of Christianity by the Vatican, and now apparently rehabilitated by the geo-political and theological re-structuring of the Roman Catholic Church’s centre since the appointment of the Latin American pope Francesco Bergoglio (Francis I). His approach is grounded on a ‘preferential option for the poor’ and all who are marginalised in society. The missionary’s work has been specifically aimed at the various *phu-noi* of Thailand, including ‘hill tribes’ (*chao khaw*) groups

in northern Thailand, Thai Lao peasant communities in the North-East, and especially slum dwellers in Bangkok. In the 1980's the priest decided to move into his own shack at Tuek Deang in order to devote himself to *dek salam*. Soon after, he established Saint Jacob Centre.

Father Nicola's Catholicism enriched *dek salam*'s social environment with new socio-political discourses of childhood, poverty and ethnicity. During my conversations with the missionary, Nicola argued that the "inculturation"<sup>15</sup> of Catholicism should be realised in the context of the marginalised ethnic minority cultures of Thailand, rather than being placed at the service of the militarised Buddhist monarchical formation of 'Thai-ness', as is historically the case for the Thai Catholic church<sup>16</sup>. Contrary to most Thai Catholic priests, he was also reluctant to view a deified king as a Buddhist symbol of sacred fatherhood, compatible with his Christian belief of God's supreme fatherhood.

In Father Nicola's view, slum children become the first representatives of the Lord. Because they are the last in their society, they are God's most beloved sons. According to the missionary, in the relationship with them one has the opportunity to meet Jesus Christ, "a God who almost scares the powerful because of his identification with the dregs of humankind". By metaphorically linking the oppression northern and north-eastern ethnic minorities are subjected to in relation to 'Thai-ness' with children's normative position as *phu-noi*, Father Nicola further explained: "Those considered *phu-noi* by the Thai state are the closest to God's truth. The sacred elements of childhood and poverty coincide with the condition of slum and *chao khaw* children. They must be taught this so they can proudly claim their identity against social injustice".

This "theological-political construction" (de Vries 2006) of childhood moulded adult-child relationships and attachment patterns at Saint Jacob's where adult educators, mostly seminarians from the Thai-ethnic North under Father Nicola's pastoral guidance, were encouraged by the missionary to consider *dek salam* like they were their teachers. According to Father Nicola: "It is the children, as manifestation of the divine, subjects intuitively able to recognise the Truth, to promote the revelation of Christ in seminarians. Only those who demonstrate passion and participation in the service of the last [Saint Jacob's *dek salam*] will continue their spiritual journey towards

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15 The theological term "inculturation" gained a wider acceptance at the time of the 32nd General Congregation of the Society of Jesus (December 1, 1974 - April 7, 1975) (Roest-Crollius 1984, pp. 1-18). It was intended to be an adjustment of the concept of "adaptation" that had emerged from the statements of the Second Vatican Council (Cuturi 2004, p. 22).

16 Father Nicola's approach represents a minority position within the Thai Catholic church. Elsewhere (Bolotta, in press-a) I have shown the contiguity between Catholicism and the Thai monarchy, highlighting Catholic missionaries' historical compliance with the state culture of 'Thai-ness'.

ordination”.

Father Nicola’s sacralisation of *dek salam* was also embodied in his affective and relational attitudes towards children. Rather than acting as a *phu-yai*, as Thai priests like Buddhist monks are expected to do in relation to laymen, he used to hug dirty slum children, hold little girls gently (whereas Thai Buddhist monks are not allowed to touch or be touched by women), sit at their level during meals, using impolite slum dialects – in short challenging all the embodied dimensions of ‘Thai-ness’, and overturning the normative social hierarchy, with the enactment of a bottom-up engaged Catholicism<sup>17</sup>. When he visited the slums, a swarm of joyfully squealing kids, all vying for his attention, announced his arrival. Carrying a boy on his back, holding another one’s hands, Father Nicola spent entire days playing around with children.

What is important to underline is that the emotional relationship with the missionary did not replace children’s attachment bonds with other caregivers. Instead, it offered *dek salam* a new possibility of self-formation, which the children can actively draw on to reframe, challenge, or restructure those representations of self that are shaped through other relationships. Over repeated interactions, indeed, children seem increasingly able to identify the discrepancies between the adults taking care of them. It is precisely in this difference in care giving between Thai *phu-yai* and Father Nicola that children’s agency and self-formation strategies found a hybrid cultural space to be organised. The majority of the children hosted at Saint Jacob’s developed a strong attachment to Father Nicola, considered by many as their real father (*pho tae*), while maintaining a relationship with their parents and relatives. These are, for example, Yut’s (14 years old) words on the missionary:

One day I saw *pho* Nicola coming to Tuek Deang with a bag full of chips and candies. He put me over his shoulders and I went to visit the whole community (*chum chon*) with him. He was very good to us children; he treated us all as his sons. He always bought us something to eat and he took us to the park to play. *Pho* brought me to Saint Jacob’s in a big house. *Pho* Nicola loves us all (*rak thuk khon*) (Yut, August 2010).

Even though Father Nicola did not embody the traditional Thai authority model, children felt the need to look at him as a new kind of *phu-yai* and father to whom rely on. *Dek salam*, ethnic children coming from fluid fam-

17 Research has shown that missionary interventions have historically created opportunities for both submission and resistance. David Mosse, for example, has explored the genealogy of Tamil Nadu *dalit*’s “Brahmanic Christianity”, stating: “Even while the Church tolerated or helped reproduce hierarchical orders of caste, participation in Christian religion [...] inculcated capacities for the manipulation of symbolic meanings or transactions that would be used (alongside political action) by subaltern groups” (Mosse 2012, p. 20).

ily and attachment environments, saw Father Nicola as a *phu-yai* who didn't relate to them as *phu-noi*. The relationship with the priest became, thus, yet another element of affective, religious and political reference in the elaboration of the children's cultural self. The case of Kla is quite meaningful.

### ***"Heaven belongs to poor children!"***

I met Kla in 2008, when he was 12 years old and a guest of Saint Jacob Centre. He had been received at Saint Jacob's 6 years previously. He lived at Tuek Deang with his father, 30, and his paternal grandmother, a 65-year-old woman from the Northeast. His mother had separated from her partner when he was 5 to return to Chayaphum in the North, pregnant by another man. When Father Nicola began operating at the slum, Kla's father was serving a 6-year sentence for drug dealing and his grandmother would return home late in the evening after all day collecting plastic bottles and cans at the nearby Mor Chit bus station. Kla followed the missionary about like a shadow.

If the missionary assumed the role of new father (*pho mai*) for Kla, Thai *phu-yai* never earned the child's respect. Prasit, the chief educator at St. Jacob's, considered Kla difficult to manage. He didn't follow the rules, lacked respect for *phu-yai*, and only became a 'good child' (*dek dee*) in the presence of Father Nicola. During my stay at Saint Jacob in 2011, I noticed that Kla was somewhat influential to other children. The long relationship with Father Nicola gave him authority. For many children at Saint Jacob's Kla was *phi* (elder brother). His leadership, on the other hand, seemed to deviate from the Thai model of *phu-yai*. Kla emulated his hero, Father Nicola: he taught catechism to *dek salam*, gave advice on the most disparate matters, he reprimanded those who made mistakes, he took interest in the family problems of all *nong* (younger brothers), he taught the youngest children the basics of central Thai, while still encouraging them to recognise the cultural value of their parents' native idiom. In addition, the child was able to express himself in an anti-normative manner with respect to 'Thai-ness' ideology, in his opinion finalised to celebrate Thai militarism and the inferiority of the slum poor.

In particular, Kla proved to be critical toward Thai teachers' pedagogical practices and attitudes. He accused them of embodying negative moral models: "Dad Nicola taught me that children have to be listened to. Teachers, instead, only know how to give orders and impose rules. They think that *khon isarn* (people from the North-East) are stupid, dirty and dangerous". His judgment operated a systematic comparison between Thai *phu-yai* and the missionary: a comparison in which all *phu-yai* were defeated and that made Father Nicola an ideal model of unattainable perfection. For Thai teachers, it became difficult to manage a child who not only called *phu-*

*yai*’s authority into question but also identified as a perfect replica of the missionary. Kla felt he could educate *nong* better than any Thai *phu-yai* could. Between 2011 - 2013 he was expelled from two different schools for accusing some teachers of abusing their position of power, and of being unfair and discriminatory towards *dek salam*. Even Saint Jacob’s educators often complained about Kla’s irreverent behaviour but *pho* Nicola’s affectionate condescension seemed to protect him, legitimising implicitly the child’s ‘anti-leadership’.

When, in 2013, *pho* Nicola was transferred to another parish by Bangkok clerical authorities, things changed for Kla. After only 3 months, Kla left the NGO to go back to Tuek Deang. The young man, then 17, found a job at Mor Chit bus station with his grandmother’s mediation. Still in touch with Father Nicola, he kept dreaming about becoming a humanitarian operator dealing with poor children. He was still in touch with the guests (current and past) at Saint Jacob’s through *Facebook*, monitoring their evolution, and regularly providing the children with divergent indications in respect to those given by Thai educators. Additionally, Kla had started to take care of several *nong* in the slum. He often distributed tips or bought a meal to Tuek Deang children, squandering his measly salary in few days. He gained popularity thanks to the desecrating role he played to moralise the unemployed *phu-yai* who idly drink or gamble in the shacks of the slum. While I was staying at Tuek Deang, I often had to lend him money, or intervene in quarrels with *phu-yai* not willing to tolerate the child’s invectives. The fact that Kla was known as one of Father Nicola’s most beloved children has always protected him. Kla was not only aware of this, but he also used this knowledge within the slum as a “symbolic capital” (Bourdieu 2005) to reinforce his own vacillating moral leadership.

One afternoon in 2012, during a visit, he showed me his diary where he wrote his reflections daily. He wanted to share the entry of that day, titled “Jesus in my everyday life” (*Phra Jesu chaw nai chiwit pracham wan khong phom*):

We can find Jesus with the poor, the sick, the orphans, the disadvantaged children (*dek doi okad*). God wants us to understand the importance of these people because they are God’s sons. Jesus said: ‘The kingdom of heaven belongs to children’. With these words, Jesus wanted to suggest to all of us to be like children, to serve people ‘lower’ (*tam kwa raw*) than us with faith and purity. God has seen the purity of children and has repeated: “If you do not become as the little children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Kla, August 2012).

I asked Kla what the purity of children was. “Children don’t know what poverty is, what illness and disadvantaged conditions are. Children are pure

because to them all people are equal. There is no one up or down. Just people.”

Kla has never lived with his biological parents. He has mixed feelings towards them: when he harshly accuses them, he feels immediately guilty, realising he has pronounced the unpronounceable. He has often described them as irresponsible, but regrets not being able to support them. In his opinion, even if they have abandoned him, they gave him the gift of life nonetheless. Mom and dad are “the *phra* (monks) of the house” he affirmed more than once, recalling the ‘Buddhist State mantra’ of gratitude (*khwam-kathanyu*), and tormenting himself over not being a sufficiently deserving son. While his parents unsettle him, his paternal grandmother is a key figure he can rely on. Since he returned to Tuek Deang, he often attends the Buddhist temple with her. The last time I met him, in 2014, I asked him about his thoughts on state religion. I took for granted that he must have become a fervent Christian, but his answer took me by surprise: “Buddhism is a good religion, like all religions. It helps to calm your heart, it teaches *dharma* and compassion. I have not chosen my religion yet. When I was at Saint Jacob Centre, I was a Christian. Now that I am with grandma, I am a Buddhist. My *pho* [Father Nicola] is Christian and my grandma is a Buddhist, so I don’t know which my religion is yet”.

### **Reconfigured hierarchies: Religion, affective bonds, and children’s selves**

The story of Kla highlights how religion and the alternative models of care poor children encounter in religious NGOs such as Saint Jacob’s can become an important reference in children’s efforts to make sense of their growing (in)dependence, even to reframe the self in ways that entail a strong political critique of their ethnic and socio-economic subordination. Indeed, as a number of social scientists have shown, faith experiences are a potential site for self-definition and the exercise of choice (Hefner 1993, Bauman and Young 2012).

Kla adhered to Father Nicola’s Catholicism to resist social stigma, displace the *phu-noi* position, and to boost his (ethnic) self-esteem. Through affective interactions with the missionary, Kla learnt to re-conceptualise himself as God’s beloved son rather than *dek salam*, inferior subject, and moral abnormality. He also connected this self-formulation to his multiple attachments with younger peers in the slum, re-conceptualised as political victims towards whom he has moral responsibility. Not all children, however, internalised Father Nicola’s political-theological approach to *dek salam* as Kla did.

Consider for example the case of Miu, a 14-year-old girl, guest at Saint Jacob’s who, differently from Kla, had both her biological parents, wanted

to integrate into school and Thai society, and chose to move to the NGO just to benefit from the Catholic structure’s economic support. During an interview, she explained her relationship with Buddhism and Catholicism: “Both Jesus and Lord Buddha teach people how to be good. Father Nicola comes to Tuek Deang to help us. He is generous (*chaidee*). He brings us to his Centre and support our education, but I’m Thai, so I must be Buddhist!” While the missionary’s Catholicism was primarily perceived by Miu as a form of charity addressed to slum children, Buddhism was experienced as an essential point of reference in relation to the normative Thai self. Significantly, she added: “I really like Jesus because he has sacrificed himself (*siasala*) for the salvation of humankind. I’d like to be a soldier, so to give my life for the country and for Thai people. This action gives great merits (*bun*)!” Christ’s sacrifice, as the soldier’s, was interpreted by Miu within an horizon of meanings defined by the discourse of the Thai normative identity. It was for her emblem of a Thai nationalistic value (*siasala*), the actualisation of which is condition for the accumulation of great karmic merits (*bun*). Rather than using Catholicism to oppose ‘Thai-ness’, as Kla did, Miu identified in Jesus yet another symbol of Thai normative morality. She referred to his crucifixion as a source of inspiration to reinforce a desired image of herself as a selfless soldier serving the Thai nation. In order to be accepted into Thai urban society, Miu identified with the ‘Thai good child’ model and the discourse portraying *dek salam* as primitive ethnic small people, feeling deeply ashamed of her own origins as an end result. This is why, while relating to *phu-yai* outside the slum she was born in and to middle-class peers at school, Miu used to hide her identity as a *dek salam* and Saint Jacob’s guest, pretending instead to live in a condo in Bangkok downtown. When she finally gained her diploma, Miu decided to leave both the slum and Saint Jacob’s as a way to dispose of her secret self as *dek salam* and consolidate herself as Thai *phu-yai*.

Kla and Miu differently appropriated Father Nicola’s theological-political construction of *dek salam* in relation to the other embodied discourses shaping their hybrid self. Their stories show the variety of interpretations inherent in these children’s self-formation, which can even take quite ambiguous directions. In some cases, for example, even if Father Nicola’s Catholicism subtended a strong political-theological critique of Thai monarchical social hierarchy and ethnic nationalism, and although his caring behaviour differed intentionally from Thai *phu-yai*’s, children tended nonetheless to interpret him as such. Father Nicola could be perceived as another kind of *phu-yai*, but still as a *phu-yai*. Wat, 9 years old, drew a parallel between the missionary and recently deceased (October 2016) King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX), who – as we previously discussed – is publicly attributed the emotional role of the nation’s father and embodies the vertex of the Thai Buddhist social pyramid:

In Thailand, the King is the best and most generous kind of man because he is patient and is an example to us all. He helps everyone and takes care of us children [Thai citizens]. But here at Saint Jacob's the greatest man is my dad [Father Nicola] because he is able to see deep into people's heart, cares about everyone, and considers all of us as his children (Wat, July 2011).

In the context of patriarchal regimes like Thailand, where the omnipotent, benevolent and right father, who acts for the sake of his children, constitutes the dominant political ethos, subjects might develop affective attachments to charismatic authority figures deemed able to provide protection and caring (Sennett 2006). While this attachment relationship provides the subordinate subjects with a sense of security, it implies their dependency, passivity, and a substantial lack of agency. Moreover, the bond of affection, kinship, and 'filial devotion' that links marginalised children to their 'saviours' is not without risks. Lovely fathers can turn in predators, as shown by the most reported cases of child sex abuse and paedophilia among Catholic priests (Schepers-Hughes 1998).

In slum children's self-formation, a key role is simultaneously played by many different caregivers – whether a biological parent, a friend, a Catholic priest, or a symbolic 'parent' with whom there is no physical proximity but subjective and emotional, as King Bhumibol is for most Thai people. Children's embodiment of different relational models, therefore, produce hybrid, contextually dynamic, and multi-layered configurations of self that might present a certain degree of ambivalence, at political level too.

Emotional, religious, and political dimensions are entangled in children's self. Amongst *dek salam* who prioritised Father Nicola as a self-model to identify with, many did not convert to Catholicism or, if they did, they still considered themselves as Buddhists while maintaining multiple attachments to their (foster) mothers, grandmothers, relatives, or friends in the slum. The relationship they established with their caregivers' religion did not seem to be based only on rational arguments<sup>18</sup>. Some constructed their self according to Father's Nicola religious beliefs simply out of their willingness to please their 'dad'. In this regard, these were the words of Fa, a 12-year-old orphan at Saint Jacob:

When I talk to dad [father Nicola] I often get emotional. He touches my heart because he always asks me about my feelings. Dad is not like Buddhist monks. When I see them arriving I have to move aside to avoid coming into

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<sup>18</sup> Opposing an 'intellectualistic' understanding of conversion, Robert Hefner described it as a social process "emerging both from the ideas and intentions of individuals and from the institutions and circumstances that constrain and routinize the world in which people act, often outside their full awareness" (Hefner 1993, p. 27).

contact with them. Dad hugs me instead and always tells me that we (*dek salam*) are God’s most beloved sons. We are not *phu-noi* for him! This is why Catholicism is good (Fa, August 2011).

In fact, *dek salam* could temporarily turn Catholics not only for political reasons, or as a contextual identity strategy to fight against discrimination, but also because of their desire to benefit from Father Nicola’s caring and affective attentions.

Certainly, the alternative socialisation venues of the slum and the Saint Jacob Centre provided *dek salam* with possibilities of self-formation that are distinct from Thai school teachers’ and public officials’ stigmatised view of the poor. The emotional bond with Father Nicola, in particular, offered some children a religious space where their ethnic, class, and generational identities can be revalorised and potentially transformed into a subversive political self.

## Conclusions

Children living in the slums of Bangkok, as other categories of marginal childhood throughout the world, are subjected to multiple institutional interventions aimed at ‘protecting’ their rights and/or correcting their ‘deviance’. Besides the state and secular NGOs, religious organisations play a major role in these children’s lives, providing alternative venues of socialisation, and directly shaping how adults take care of children, as well as children’s self-interpretations (Campigotto et al 2012) – sometimes in ways politically conflicting with the state strategies of poverty governance.

In this article, I have shown the political complexity that frames self-processes in the specific case of a group of (apparently) ‘independent’ children, who were raised in a slum of Bangkok according to rural practices of collective childcare, and are supported as disadvantaged ‘slum children’ (*dek salam*) in a Catholic NGO. The place these *dek salam* come from, the slum, the state contexts of schooling, and the Catholic NGO, embody divergent interpretations of ‘childhood’, adult-child relationship, and poverty. In each of the places they circulate and grow in, these children are taken care of by adults in different ways and educated according to conflicting religious and political goals. Rather than being involved in a dyadic relationship with a single caregiver – as postulated within dominant approaches to child development and attachment theory – these children have formed multiple attachments and struggle to integrate them into a sense of self, which is anyway plural, dialogical, and inhabited by many ‘others’ (Van Meijl 2006).

For these children, Father Nicola – the head of the Catholic NGO they partly grew up in – represents an alternative parental model to the politi-

cised, Buddhist standard proposed by the Thai state. While *dek salam*'s family background, ethnicity, wider autonomy from adults, and peer-to-peer solidarity are perceived by state officials and schoolteachers alike as a moral disorder to be corrected, the Catholic missionary's theological-political re-interpretation of Thailand's 'small people' (*phu-noi*) as God's beloved sons is appropriated by some of the children as a political resource to resist social stigma and challenge urban poor's subordination within Thai power hierarchies. My analysis of this particular case clearly illustrates how attachment and self-formation are deeply shaped by institutional, economic, and religious historically situated processes, which interact with children's agency. It also demonstrates the political relevance of NGOs and religious organisations in providing marginal children with knowledge and possibilities of self-formation that might (or might not) differ from those prescribed by the state.

While this article focuses on the children assisted by Saint Jacob Centre in Bangkok, there are many other aid organisations, both secular and religious, that are dealing with marginal children, poverty, social and environmental issues throughout Thailand. Not all Christian NGOs share Father Nicola's critical approach, just like not all Buddhist monks support the state rhetoric on urban poor. If the Thai state discourse of discrimination against *dek salam* makes historical use of Buddhist concepts as political instruments of moral legitimisation, divergent interpretations of Buddhism have been flourishing across Thai society in recent years, including various strands of socially engaged Buddhism emphasising compassion and socio-economical justice – rather than unconditioned gratitude towards (ethnic Thai) 'big people' (*phu-yai*) – as core values (Lapthananon 2012).

What is certain is that *dek salam*'s affective bonds with an Italian Catholic priest reveal much more than a particular type of charity in the slums of Bangkok. They rather bear witness to the complex interplay of religious, political and socio-economical dimensions that frame small people's self in today's militarised Thailand.

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# **Care Under Constraint: Street Children in a Rehabilitation Centre in Tijuana (Mexico)**

IRENE POCHETTI\*

## **Abstract**

Based on an ethnographic investigation carried out in 2010 in the city of Tijuana, this article questions the policies of institutional intervention targeting marginalised teenagers living in this city on the border with the US. Tijuana is characterised by the proximity to the United States and by the violence linked to drug trafficking. Such city traits are reflected in institutions, conceptualisations and actions concerning intervention towards street children. What is the specificity of the policies and institutions concerning those individuals? How can it be explained? How do teenagers deal with institutions and the subjectivity they propose? I will argue that the treatment of the addiction and non-voluntary reclusion in rehabilitation centres are the cornerstone of the treatment of street children on the border. The analysis of the speeches of those youngsters considered by institutions as “incorrigible” will show the ambiguity linked to the normativity of those kinds of institutions. On the one hand, the rehabilitation centres are rigid structures that compel and constrain individuals into a completely new subjectivity. On the other hand, those places represent a starting point from which the young people succeed in considering themselves as subjects, sometimes in contradiction with the normativity of the institution.

**Keywords:** Marginal Childhood, Drugs, Institutions, Identities, Tijuana, Mexico

Tijuana<sup>1</sup> is a city whose dynamics are strongly determined by its proximity to the United States. It is the main gateway to the country and is also known worldwide for drug-related violence and for being marked by corruption in the broadest sense (Berumen 2003). Social representations of the city are

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1 The workgroup “traitements et contraintes” – <http://www.traitements-contraintes.org> – played an important role on the analysis of my field material.

linked to its border position, but also institutions and the ways of thinking and acting towards adolescents associated with the street world are strongly influenced by this characteristic of the city. They produce a local and specific way of apprehending this public problem. Based on a two-month ethnographic field research in Tijuana carried out between May and July 2010<sup>2</sup> and through the theoretical tools provided by urban anthropology and the sociology of institutions and of social work, this article questions institutional policies for the care of marginal young people having life experiences on the streets of this border city. What are the specificities of these policies and various actors (private and public) of care? How do adolescents “deal with” these institutions and the subjectivities they have the mission to shape?

In this article, I use the expressions “associated with the worlds of the street” or “street children” in a broad sense. I refer here to young people who live or have lived for certain periods of their life on the street or in close contact with it and outside specific childcare institutions such as family or school. The purpose of this is to go beyond the distinction among children *in* the street (referring to children who work on the streets, but are not separated from their family) and children *of* the street (actually living and sleeping in the street) (Taçon 1985). This categorisation has been produced by the international organisations and adopted widely by social scientists. But it crystallises situations that are in fact transitory (Glauser 1990, Champy 2015) and doesn’t allow for describing the precise experiences of these young people, nor to account for the multiplicity of forms in which the street is meaningful and represents a “support” for those youth relegated to the margins.

Many social science researches carried out on street children since the 1980’s, in Latin America and around the world have treated the issue from several perspectives. The first works concentrated on the characteristics of this population and its definition (Aptekar 1998, Lucchini 1993, Meunier 1977, Hetch 1998, Stoecklin 2000). Later some others’ field research investigated the strategies of survival of these groups (Suremain 2006, Pérez López 2009, Magazine 2003) and some of them focused on the relationship of those groups with urban space both materially and symbolically (Morelle 2007, Pérez López 2009, Bolotta 2014). Here, it is a matter of understanding how the characteristics of Tijuana and the boundary structures and influenced the trajectories and life in the street for poor youngsters and how they direct the work of the institutions for these young individuals.

The case of the El Refugio rehabilitation centre<sup>3</sup>, allows me to advance the

<sup>2</sup> The field research in Tijuana is part of a 23-month field research between 2003 and 2010 in Mexico for my PhD dissertation.

<sup>3</sup> All persons and names of places that appear in this article have been anonymised.

idea that the treatment of addiction and the non-voluntary confinement of adolescents are the keystones of the way the city actors take care of street children at the border. The analysis of young people's speeches shows the ambiguity associated with the normativity of this kind of institution. On the one hand, these are rigid structures that push individuals into a new subjectivity. On the other hand, these places also represent a point of departure from which some young people succeed in asserting themselves as individuals, sometimes in contradiction to the normativity of the latter, in other cases at the intersection with the integration of norms, adaptations, and projections outwards.

At first, I will show how the specific characteristics of Tijuana have led me to conduct an investigation on street children in a closed rehabilitation centre. Afterwards I will characterise this closed centre, its program and its proximity to the total institution (Goffman 1961). Finally, I will show how this addiction-centred institution, in the case of minors, receives a much broader set of adolescent profiles that live in close contact with the street and are quite independent of their home or of institutions supposed to supervise youth. I will show how, for these young people, this civil society institution, which works vertically to the transformation of subjects, can nevertheless represent, a resource of individuation.

### **Tijuana: a city closing in on street children**

Tijuana is a modern city that developed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in close connection with the neighbouring city of San Diego and was highly influenced by the policies and socio-economic dynamics of California and the United States. Its architecture and buildings reflect its relative youth. However, poor road maintenance and the chaotic development of housing estates also reflect a demographic explosion and very rapid growth that is difficult to manage (Griffin and Ford 2009):

At the beginning of the 20th century Tijuana was a small community of 242 people settled on the riverbed, while on the other side of the border, San Diego was the largest city on the North American border and had 17,700 inhabitants (Alegría 2009). Today the whole agglomeration of Tijuana, including the localities of Tecate and Rosarito, counts a population of 1,559,683. The development of the city has been strictly linked to North American policies such as prohibition and employment policies. Indeed, Tijuana is a city characterised by the fact of being a binational space constructed in constant relation and reference to the border, and by a certain violence linked primarily to the drug trafficking (Quintero and Martín 1995).

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This is also the reason why I do not specify where El Refugio is in the city.

Different childcare institutions have chosen a problem-oriented specialisation strategy in the last five years<sup>4</sup>. This has reinforced a highly polarised conception of the street child: certain “profiles” are considered as absolute victims and others as dangerous expressions of the corruption of the city. Le DIF Municipal<sup>5</sup>, the local childcare protection, is the main local public institution with a shelter created for street children that only accepts boys. It functions as a filtering centre as well. Many minors in difficulties are or should be referred from the shelter to specific institutions according to their profile. Migrant children go to a specific shelter or are sent back to their families if possible; victims of sexual abuse and exploitation go to a specific institution, delinquents to juvenile prison and teenage drug users to a rehabilitation centre. Within the City Council of Tijuana, the different actors involved take part in a specific committee for “Children on the streets and in danger”. The division of “tasks” according to children’s profiles is a recent choice of these institutions, which initially all worked in an undifferentiated way. It is important to point out that despite this precise classification based on different profiles, many children or teenagers fit several profiles at the same time, which is of course problematic.

Historically Tijuana is represented as a city of “excess” where anomie, perversion and violence prevail. This image partly originates in the development of the city, linked to the American prohibitionism during the interwar period, which favoured the appearance of bars, playhouses and tourist complexes on the other side of the border (Berumen, 2003). From the 1990’s onwards the transformation of Tijuana into a strategic location for drug trafficking to the United States and the exacerbated war between cartels produced this image of violence. The Cartel linked to the family of Arellano Félix performed a significant and spectacular number of executions<sup>6</sup>. In 1999 and 2000, the number of executions related to drug trafficking amounted to 400 in the city of Tijuana and these crimes remain largely unpunished. The war against the Cartel undertaken by the government of Felipe Calderon in 2006 exacerbated the climate of violence and feeling of insecurity in the city (Devineau 2013, Bataillon 2016).

In this context, the city streets are perceived as an extremely dangerous space, especially for young people. The “public space” is heavily controlled

<sup>4</sup> Referring to the fieldwork led in 2010.

<sup>5</sup> DIF *desarrollo integral de la familia* (Literally, the “integral development of the family”) is the institution of protection of the Mexican childhood which exists at federal, state and local level. The local level of child protection depends on the City council and is relatively independent.

<sup>6</sup> The Arellano Felix cartel, which controlled the city and the entire border region of Baja California from 1995 to 2000, played an important role in consolidating this monstrous image. This family of entrepreneurs was able to maintain and establish this control through violence and corruption.

by the local police, ordered to take charge of any young person found unaccompanied on the streets at late times (from around 11 pm).

Since 2004, as soon as a minor is identified as being alone in the public space at night, he is detained by the police. They send him to a public institution or an NGO such as the rehabilitation centre. The child who took drugs in the street found other forms of living, because he was prevented from living on the street, both by us and the authorities (Roberto, 55, director of a home for street children and orphans, field notes, June 4, 2010).

The city and its actors, by setting up a public space with no flexibility, create a controlled, closed environment for the youths, making it impossible for them to organise their lives and to have an enduring, visible presence on the downtown streets. While in Mexico City, groups of street teenagers and adults occupy in a very visible way the squares, gardens and some streets in the city centre (Pérez López 2006), in Tijuana street kids have learned to stay in hotels since they are not allowed to use the public space. One of the reasons for this strict control of the city centre seems to be the danger that Tijuana represents for young lives, but there are other factors that come into question as well. Actually, the Tijuana Tourist Committee actively participated in the implementation of this policy in order to “clean up” the city centre and promote a new image of the city. During an interview, the director of this committee underlined that the problem of “children in the public space” was a degradation and considered as “intolerable” in the public opinion, as “they sold children right on the pavement of the Avenida Revolucion” (Fernando, about 40 years old, field notes).

What emerges quite clearly from the way my inquiry was organised is the presence of a very important link between Tijuana’s image of degradation and danger, violence linked to the drug economy and the type of care for marginalised children and young people. In this context, which is also in the context of an abundant supply of rehabilitation centres, the main entry to the issue of street children is by the centres in question. The fact that in Tijuana drugs and their economy is a major societal issue (Rojas Guiot and others 2009)<sup>7</sup> that occupies social space in an important way is also reflected in the experience of street children and youth. Actually, when I arrived in this city to explain that I was working on the issue of street children, the different institutional actors I met sent me to the El Refugio rehabilitation centre, telling me that if I wanted to meet “children who actually have lived on the street”, this is where I had to go to investigate. Basically, to put it

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<sup>7</sup> According to a survey by the Instituto Nacional de Psiquiatria, between 1998 and 2005, drug use increased from 16.6% to 19%, and illicit drug use increased from 14.7% to 16.9 %.

abruptly, being a street child in Tijuana is considered as being synonymous with drug addiction.

### The closed space of the rehabilitation centre

It was in El Refugio that I fulfilled the most intensive part of my fieldwork in Tijuana. The building is organised in order to prevent escape. At the entrance, there is always someone to note who comes in and out and at what time. On the roof, there is always someone seated on a chair supervising the place. The centre receives adults and teenagers who have “problems with drugs”. It is an association, founded in 1991, which now has 4 homes. They work based on the model of therapeutic communities. Like in other border towns, in Tijuana, this type of establishment is particularly represented and representative of civil society: they are about 150<sup>8</sup>. During my investigation, the young people in this centre were 47, they were between 12 and 17 years old, 21 of them were boys. Adults enroll in the program on their own will, on a voluntary basis, but it is compulsory for children. The rehab program lasts 90 days for both adults and minors and has three components: the “behavioural part” (rules, limits and discipline), the group therapy, and the learning part. Lessons to finish primary or secondary school, workshops to learn practical work such as mechanics are offered into the community. The therapeutic community model I used here is called “mutual assistance” (*ayuda mutua*). It is based on the idea that first of all it is necessary to recognise the problem of dependence and therefore to recognise oneself as an addict in order to recover. After that it is necessary to have spirituality. One must be helped by a superior being to achieve abstinence (Odgers Ortiz, Galaviz Granados 2014)<sup>9</sup>.

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8 There is a web page that highlights the recognition by the state of the importance of the functions of these centres. *Centros de rehabilitación del Estado de Baja California* <http://ipebc.gob.mx/centros-de-rehabilitacion/>. It should be emphasised that the pharmaceutical treatment of addictions in Mexico is not very widespread and that hospitals often lack resources to deal with this public health issue.

9 Olga Odgers classifies the approach of rehabilitation centre in Tijuana in three types. The first model consists of a clinical approach, through the work of psychologists and social workers. The second is an approach based on the therapeutic community, based on mutual assistance. The third is that of openly religious centres which conceive of addiction as a spiritual problem and which in the great majority are of evangelical Pentecostal orientation. The El Refugio centre, like others, combines therapeutic approach and spirituality. The largest group is represented by therapeutic communities. These centres are regulated by a Mexican law on the treatment of addictions. *Norma Oficial Mexicana NOM-028-SSA2-1999, Para la prevención, tratamiento y control de las adicciones*. They depend and are or should be, supervised by the Baja California State Psychiatric Institute, and must respect human rights, hygiene rules and complete records of users.

The main characteristic of this place is that almost all functions are fulfilled by persons who have been interned. The employees are former interns rehabilitated who continue to be a part of the institution. The only external staff I have seen are psychologists and social workers in training, who come to do activities with children from time to time. Adults and minors share the same establishment, but the spaces remain separate even if there is a constant flow between teenagers and adults. Firstly, because some common spaces are used both by youngsters and by adults (such as the refectory for example), even if the schedules are staggered. Then, because the adolescents cross several times a day in the courtyard of adult's area (to go to eat their meals, to go to the small inner shop that sells cigarettes, sweets, soap). Finally, some adults, the "most rehabilitated" who participate in the community service, are responsible for monitoring the free activities of the youngsters and interact quite often with them. Teenagers arrive at this centre through several channels. Some of them arrive through the domestic violence police unit or a judge (*juez calificador*). When young people are found, for example, on the streets at 2 am, in the "*zona norte*", the red light neighbourhood, they are then "put in security" by authorities here. Others are arrested by the police committing offenses in public spaces (tagging buildings is often associated with inhalation) and in this case they arrive in handcuffs. The DIF of the State, but also of the city, sometimes send some of their "guests" there. According to the president of the El Refugio (who is also, like the majority of people in this place, a former intern) at the DIF of the State of Baja California, "they only want well-educated orphans". He means that "difficult" children are sent to the rehabilitation centre. Very often some families bring their children here, or ask the police to do so. The pretext in all cases is the consumption of psychotropic drugs, but very often it is a more complex situation where the parents "resign" somehow or just can't deal with the "incorrigible" side of their children and think that at least in the centre he or she will be safer than at home or in the street.

During an interview with Jesús, in charge of the teenager's section, he tells me about the different phases of the arrival of young people.

The first days when they arrive they take off their shoes and are given sandals, because they will try to escape. Afterwards, they start to get up at a specific time (6 am) and they go to school (they receive the lessons within the centre). They begin to socialise with others and to understand the rules of collective behaviour. Here there are no blows, you cannot tag, you do not say vulgarities, they come here with the law of the strongest, but here they are shown that it is not like that. During the first 7 days, the young person stays with the others, follows what happens, adapts himself through imitation and the example of others (Jesús, about 50 years old, field notes, June, 6 2010).

Jesús receives them after this first short integration process. At this point the administrative process begins so that the child can follow distance courses of the school and can pass examinations. The third step is the preparation of the family for the return of their child. There are also groups of therapy and speech for families. Sunday is visiting day. Families come to see their children in the afternoon. However, several young people do not receive regular visits. This depends very much on the family. There is no maximum time to stay in the community. If a teenager is there and he wants to finish his studies in this centre, he can ask to remain there, even if according to Jesus, very few young people can stand this confinement very long. In general, they stay a few months longer, in some exceptional cases even a year or two.

The young people received in this centre are generally from Tijuana itself. Some come from the United States, but the majority are from the suburban area, and from very poor backgrounds. The association maintains itself in different ways, basically with donations. Each family is supposed to pay 250 *pesos* per week, the City Council through the municipal DIF gives 10,000 *pesos*<sup>10</sup> per month to the structure. The interned adults go to work and give their salary to the structure. They work in the *maquiladoras* (assembly plants) and make night schedules. However, this represents very little financial resource for the institution.

### **The importance of example**

Jesús is about fifty years old. With his sunken cheeks, and his black moustache, he looks very serious. His arms are covered with old tattoos which have lost a little of their contours, but which testify of a past of rebellion. During our meeting, I found him intimidating. He is a man of few words but as the interview progressed, his deep and intelligent gaze softened. We started the interview in the refectory and we continued in his office. Many pictures drawn by the girls of the centre hung on the walls. Our interview was interrupted several times by teenagers dropping in for different reasons that mostly seemed to be excuses to get attention and satisfy their curiosity about my presence.

He is obviously loved and respected by these youths. His reserved nature and seriousness didn't seem to intimidate them or hinder their daily interactions with him.

He told me about his journey: After recovering from a drug addiction, he "had surrendered to God". He was offered a position at the Centre, to be in charge of children section and of the distance learning and certification program for both adult and children, supported by the National Institute

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10 About 520 euro.

of Adult Education<sup>11</sup>.

Today, he lives on site, benefiting. “I am here because I must be here, I am father, uncle, grandfather”. His story shows how influential this type of structures can be for individuals and the choices they make: for some of them, staying within the centre is only possible outcome. This situation can be interpreted as the result of a total institution (Goffman 1961). The recovery process is based on a prolonged period of abstinence and time spent at a place of residence and work, in a closed and almost cut-out world structure, in which every aspect of daily life is regimented by strict rules and shared with people in the same situation. In cases considered as a success by the institution, the institution not only treats individuals, but also claims to restore a meaning to their life and their place in the world. Rehabilitation is understood by these actors as a “re-affiliation” closely linked to the institution. This re-affiliation extends beyond the time spent within the institution. We succeed in finding or recreating a place and meanings by establishing a sense of shared identity and belonging within a community characterised by shared life experiences. During this rehabilitation (drug addiction treatment) process, abstinence remains the golden rule. This is where residents can find their place, reconnect with their family and can assert themselves in their ability to work and contribute to the economy.

This community-based organisation seems to fill a vacuum in a social context where the economic and community structures are partly overturned and disrupted by the drug market and the violence experienced in these personal histories<sup>12</sup>. Here, the institution becomes a place of identity and identification, through its rigid framework and strong constraints, but also by allowing individuals to work on their themselves, through abstinence and free discussion of shared experiences (within the framework of the *juntas*) also. Socialisation with individuals who have overcome the same ordeal is the cornerstone of the community’s logic.

In the case of this rehabilitation centre in Tijuana, not only for Jesús but also others, staying within the structure long term is presented as a vocation and a renewed sense of purpose through serving the community. It is thanks to Jesús that I was able to visit the centre regularly and observe its everyday routines but also more exceptional and festive events. The celebration of the 16th anniversary of the centre was especially interesting because it condenses in a single day several aspects characteristic of the institution’s operational logic and illustrates their method’s core values: speech and example.

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11      *Instituto Nacional de Educación para los Adultos.*

12      I discuss those aspects in my PhD dissertation “La cité des enfants des rues. Représentations, politiques et expériences des jeunesse urbaine marginales Mexico et à Tijuana”, EHESS, February 2017.

### **“Hello I am Francisco, another addict”**

Even though it is an “open day” when the centre stages its success, the organisation of this day shows the rigidity and the level of constraint that this institution imposes on its residents.

*Saturday, June 12, 2010 El Refugio* — It is the celebration of the 16th anniversary of one of the various rehabilitation centres linked to the REFUGIO. The ceremony begins at 2 pm. In the courtyard of the institution a podium is installed and facing the chairs for the public. Several representatives from different centres are present. The event begins with the reading of the founding principles of the centre and the various stages called “steps”. After that, we invite people who want to testify. On the podium placed in the shelter of a large tent, everyone states their success. We celebrate the fact that some old internal people had not consumed (*restar limpios*) psychotropic drugs for one year, two years, three years, 15 years. They sit behind a U-shaped table. The majority are adults, but there are also two teenagers. Before each of them is a large cake box. Each person who is to be celebrated must give his / her testimony and speak on the podium, and must also invite someone to speak before him: a friend, a godfather, a friend. Each speech starts with the same phrase: “Hello, I am Francisco, another addict” (*hola soy Francisco y soy un adicto mas*) and the group answer : “cheer up!!” (*animo!*). The testimony consists mainly in motivating others and thanking them for their presence and support. [...] Around 4 pm, sandwiches are served, but the people remain seated and continue to follow the ceremony. At the end of the evening, when the party begins and dinner is served, the boxes are finally opened: the cakes have all melted. (Field notes).

Young people separated by gender and age are obliged to sit in the assembly and listen to the testimonials for several hours. They are visibly bored and it is a long time, but they accept this function without protest. Indeed, this is the same function of the meetings, *juntas*, in which they participate regularly several times a week. Testimonials are the basis of the therapy. Though strictly separated by sex and age, the different residents of the centre are in the same place, they have the same right to testify and the same treatment concerning physical restraint, which means to sit for several hours listening to repetitive speeches. But there is a certain equality, everyone eats and drinks at the same time, and no one gets up or goes.

The testimonies don't give much factual or concrete information because the narratives are told through the filter of the system of values which governs the institution, and which is perfectly adhered to by those who intervene. Indeed, the witnesses insist on the sordid details of their addiction, on everything they say they are ashamed of having done: violence, family theft, humiliation, loss of sphincter control and hygiene, street life, prostitution for a dose of drugs. Male homosexual relationships are also presented as the most

humiliating stage of what is described as a descent into hell. And the entrance to the centre is presented as a pivotal moment, in which the individual was on the brink of the precipice, but thanks to the institution through trials and sacrifices, falls and failures, achieved self-reconstruction, transformation. The speeches emphasise the importance of recognising themselves as sick.

This organisation is deeply inspired by the model of AA, Alcoholics Anonymous, which is extremely widespread and widely known in popular circles in Mexico<sup>13</sup>. Gregory Bateson, in a classic article questioning the success of the AA approach, states that in recognising oneself as a sick person and accepting to entrust oneself to superior power (these are the first two steps of alcoholics anonymous), allows the alcoholic to place alcoholism inside oneself. This would make it possible to break the dichotomy of mind-matter (the basis of western epistemology) on which the experience of the sober alcoholic, characterised by a struggle between his conscious will and the rest of his personality (Bateson 1977). This surrender would break the paradoxical injunction to resist and prove its strength, it is only through a superior “power” and in the group that the individual can regain a healthy life.

Afterwards I attended other meetings, only for teenagers, which took place almost every day. They usually were led by the teenage group but the oldest ones usually managed the time, and regulated the circulation (eg. The others must ask before going to the toilet). These meetings (*juntas*) were on a free speech mode. The speakers were volunteers and just allowed the words to flow in very long monologues. I was under the impression that the general idea was to get rid of thoughts and to receive encouragement and manifestations of affections from others. According to the model of AA, speech and listening are the core of the therapy. The idea of the meeting is to create a space where one can tell stories that can only be understood by someone who has experienced the addiction. These spaces, originally for adults, are used as therapeutic tools for the adolescents. Even if experts from different backgrounds agree on the importance of speech in the treatment of addiction (Hautefeuille 2012), in this particular context those moments are marked by a certain ambivalence. Despite the self-managed side and the underlying idea of freedom, these moments are also constrained. The residents don't have the choice to attend them or not. They frame the rhythm of daily life in the centre and they are, in fact, above all a moment of socialisation and of learning about how to live in a community. These are moments of self-narrative and sometimes they can be very repetitive. It is a ritualised moment of recognition of the individual by his peers. The empty space of the podium is filled by stories, thoughts, torments. This flow of words is in some ways the thing that allows individuals to exist. But if the meeting itself is a space of non-judgment, the young expose themselves and relate to the

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13 It is very common to see advertisements of AA groups in Mexican cities.

comrades with whom they share the rest of the confinement. For this reason, we can imagine that these are not spaces that are free. On the contrary, they are rigid frameworks of self-staging that allow a certain recognition. It is to these spaces that the idea of belonging to the community of “addicts” is anchored. Young people exist by assuming and accepting this presupposition and by recognising themselves in this condition.

This institution, with its level of constraint, is representative of how the issue of street children in Tijuana is managed. I am strongly drawn towards this type of institution in order to work with children “truly of the streets”. This important fact reflects a certain climate of the city and once again explicates how drugs and the idea of a certain violence structure the apprehension of the street children issue.

### **“Difficult” teenagers and the transformation of the self**

The institution plays an important role in the trajectories of the young residents and their world. It is one of the most interesting features of their stories. Those narratives are partly produced by the institution and show how it leaves its mark on their subjectivities. However, they also reveal how this institution is a space in which these young people try to assert themselves as individuals (Martuccelli 2010) at the same time.

In his ethnography of drugs users spending their lives between vagrancy and prison, Fabrice Fernandez describes trajectories similar to those recounted here. He calls the experience of drugs a “total experience” (Fernandez and Drulhe 2010). Borrowing the expression from Robert Castel (Castel 1992), he meant that every aspect of the lives of those people was influenced by drugs and organised accordingly. There is a continuum between vagrancy and prison that strengthens the totalitarian experience of addiction. Institutional cycles contribute to the production of figures of total experience in which subjects are constructed and give meaning to their experience. Medical care, within and outside prison, can provide people with a way of bouncing back. For many, however, they are only a means of maintaining self-controlled consumption or abstinence at a given moment, before they resume the same cycle (Fernandez and Drulhe 2010).

In the case of the young people in Tijuana, things are different, probably because of their young age. Admittedly, drug is the gateway to the institution and is a guiding thread in their narratives. Still, the young people I met cannot be reduced to a simple figure of exclusion or of disaffiliation. These trajectories are certainly the product of a structural context of strong inequalities and profound social injustices, and of an inherently violent development model that creates marginal people. However, it is also clear from their stories that they are well integrated into a marginal social world

endowed with its own norms, hierarchies and solidarities. In addition, they can pass from one system to another, from wage labour to micro-delinquency and to closed institutions. Their lives do not revolve around substances only, but around economic concerns, emotional bonds or passions as well.

Although some of them seem to have broken up with their families, these adolescents do not appear to be completely disaffiliated individuals (Castel 1991). They can be considered as “integrated by and in the margins” (Pérez López 2009). Moreover, their use of narcotics is also complex to decipher because it can sometimes reflect a self-destructive movement and sometimes a form of affirmation. It entails belonging to a world with its own economy and is part of a struggle for survival, as noted by Alice Sarcinelli in the case of street children in Brazil (Sarcinelli 2009).

It is on the basis of this ambivalent experience that adolescents arrive at El Refugio through different paths and for different reasons.

More often than not, it is their family who place them there. Various stories show that in many cases families know El Refugio because friends or relatives have already been there:

Some of my uncles, the brothers of my father, stayed here (in the Refugio) for several years. That's why I came here. My mother... it had been a long time since she wanted to take me, but she never managed to catch me. Once I arrived home after living 4 months in the street. Before that, usually when I went back, I spent one day at home and my mother kicked me out again so left again. But this time, it has been 4 months, and I came back 4 days before Christmas. I came home and they refused to let me stay, they said that I had to come here (the Refugio), because I was skinny, my face was emaciated. They told me to come here and I came (Gari, 17 years old interview of June 21, 2010).

In this case, the teenager was brought with his consent, because he realised that he was in poor health. For Gari, as for some young people in Mexico City, entering an institution means taking a pause for physical reconstruction. For some Parisian addicts, the same role is played by the prison (Fernandez et Drulhe, 2010).

In the case of Luz, her confinement appears to be an answer to her fugue in the streets, her taking drugs and to the fact that her mother was “fed up with her”, and could no longer stand her rebellion, she was “incorrigible”:

It is only my second time in here. Last year I came and I stayed for five months. It was my mother who took me here. I came almost as a volunteer because I started going out to the street, (*salir a calle*) and using drugs and my mother could not take it anymore. In the last two months, my mother did not come to see me. I feel bad, I have to stay here. There is someone, a neighbour who comes

and visits. He's been clean<sup>14</sup> for seven years. I asked him to tell my mother to come and see me (Luz, 17 years old, field notes, June 30, 2010).

Rehabilitation centres are used as a last resort for families without other means to protect young people from self-destructive behaviour. This may seem paradoxical if one thinks that traumatic events often occur within these same families. Indeed, some stories show that violence occurring within the family is often the main source of danger. However, the centre seems to be a sort of recourse for families overwhelmed by a very hard socio-economic situation, to act for the good of their children or to be relieved of their responsibility. It does not matter whether it's addiction or not. These institutions end up being a way of handling situations of youth deviance in a context of multifaceted precariousness. In her account, Luz says that it is only the second time she is interned, which suggests that around her, people regularly pass through this centre. This is confirmed by Jesús, who is in charge of the minors in El Refugio. While there may be a cycle related to the extreme conditions of consumption, that explains why people may come back several times, narratives show that this type of institution covers a much broader function in Tijuana than addiction treatment. The director often emphasises the role of El Refugio as a centre of "integration" and highlights its educational role (through teaching, workshops, plastic arts classes).

Beatriz also testifies this porous boundary between addiction and "incorrigibility".

I went back to college and got fired. My mother also fired me. I roamed on the street. When I walked into a store, I used to steal clothes because I did not have any. Since I had too many complaints for theft, my mother told me that she was going to take me to the shrink, but she took me to the police instead and the police took me here (Beatriz, 15 years old, field notes, June 30, 2010).

Emiliano accepted going to El Refugio in order to escape the police after being an accomplice of a murder.

I arrived here on December 22, 2009. This is my second time. My parents took me here both times. My dad's work is to distribute products in shops and my mother is a housewife. [...] The first time I arrived here, I was stealing, there were three of us. But he (the victim) did not let himself and a friend stung him, that is to say he wounded him with a knife. He killed him. The police patrol arrived, I was afraid and ran away. I told my parents to take me here (Emiliano, 17 years old, field notes, June 24, 2010).

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14 Not using drugs.

In this case the consumption of Emiliano becomes the filter through which his acts are explained, the centre is both a way of escaping prison for having been an accomplice in a murder, and a way of taking a break after such a violent act. Emiliano could have hidden himself, but he asked to be interned. The closed centre appears to have a protective role. In the same way, Alfredo considers that he has also been “saved” by the centre. His family didn’t place him there, and he didn’t come willingly: it was the police who found him tagging. The city somehow “closed on him”, and he makes the best of a bad fortune:

This is my second time. The first time I had been brought by the police, they picked me up on a roof in the centre. [...] I was tagging. I know that this place saved my life. If I were not here, I would be in juvenile prison. If they had caught me selling drugs, I would have gone to the correctional. I am very grateful to this place for some things. I do not regret being there. Here I do not get a visit. No one comes to see me (Alfredo, 16 years old, field notes, June 28, 2010).

Another way of entering El Refugio is through other institutions. In particular, the DIF estimates that children who use drugs do not have a place in their home. In Gabriel’s story, an act of bravery, of defiance associated with drug use lead him two stays in the centre:

My brother Francisco, who was born after me and who is 13 years old, was at the DIF. And I missed him a lot. So I entered the DIF spontaneously. I was addicted to spray-paint can (*lata*). [...] A school girlfriend who was addicted asked me to do something for her: she wanted me to *bolsear*<sup>15</sup> in the DIF and to tell him what it feels like. I did not want to, but I ended up bringing enough to inhale in my pants [...] I gave some to my little brother too. This *lata* smelled stronger than the other: the whole room smelled very strong. They discovered us. [...] They said – prepare your things, they’ll come and get you. I thought it was my family, but it was a patrol. They told me: “you’re going to go to a place that’s better for you to stop drugs”. [...] I have no choice but to stay here (Gabriel, 14 years old, interview of June 27, 2010).

Gabriel is somehow punished, put apart from others, not only because he broke the rule and introduced drugs in his home, but also because he endangered his brother, who felt faint after the poisoning. He is sent away to treat his addiction because at the DIF shelter people cannot take the risk to see other children influenced by his behaviour.

He does not consider himself an addict, it is the others who see him this way. Gabrie’s behaviour can be considered as “risky”, and it was within his family that he started using drugs. Actually it was his uncle’s girlfriend who

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15      Inhaling the product of a spray-paint can in a plastic bag (*bolsa*).

pushed and taught him to inhale.

In the treatment of psychoactive substances addiction offered by El Refugio, morality is an important issue. Being a drug addict is seen as a proof of weakness and of a lack of will, and individuals are asked to admit that they will not be able to cope with this problem alone. An important factor here is that minors are considered as developing persons who need to be educated, a process in which the institution has a major role to play. On the other hand, such an educative perspective depoliticises the problem of these marginal youths.

Considering drug addiction as the main issue for street youth is not only a form of top-down policy of government of marginal population. It is also the result of the overlapping of several sociocultural dimensions, in a context where there are not many educative actions for young people outside school and work. Rehabilitation centres are a civil society response to a problem characteristic of the border, and are part of alternative medicine solutions in Mexico (Galviz, Odgers, 2014). They also represent a resource appropriated by young people in an idiosyncratic manner.

### **An ambivalent resource**

The total institution was the scene and social space where, in Tijuana, it was possible to lead a field research on the experience of street children. The Refugio illustrates the links between the urban border context, the type of care institution that it produces and the experience of young people. During the confinement, they do not all build an identical relationship with the institution, it depends on their trajectory on the street. Through the narratives I collected we can find clues to interpret the place of rehabilitation centres such as El Refugio in their trajectory in a nuanced and complex way.

The shutting out of the outside world, the careful control of everyday life, the project of self-transformation underlying the site, and the demand for joining this project make it a place where power is exercised over individuals. This is reinforced by the ratio of age and the condition of being under 18. This transformation project, which involves a strict and rigid conception of abstinence and does not distinguish between types of use, is somewhat contradictory to the values of the consumer society, reinforced at the border by the proximity to the United States. This is also what Jarret Zigon points out in his study of a religious rehabilitation centre in contemporary Russia. It shows how subjects deliberately interned are confronted with a lifestyle that is in total opposition to the consumer society and the neoliberal model (Zigon 2011) and demonstrate how people are held by a tension between the injunctions of the inside and those of the outside. Even if there is a willingness to moralise individuals in the centres of Tijuana, and some of them

fully adhere to the morality of the institution and choose to give up almost entirely the “benefits” of the “outside world”<sup>16</sup>, young people do not appear to experiment unilaterally, a subjugation that would stem from the structure of the organisation. They seem at once to seize the institution or the aspects which seem to them useful, and to distance themselves from it, finding themselves at times caught between contradictory injunctions and desires.

Alfredo has an ambivalent discourse with regard to the institution: if on the one hand he appreciates being able to speak and have a place where he can think, he manifests at the same time a desire for escape and independence, because “he feels he is wasting his time”. He confesses his desire to go out, as “it is him who decides when it is time to go”, as he will decide when he will change his life.

[...] Here, I like *juntas* (therapeutic talk group). When we talk up there ... Maybe Saturday I'll leave, because I want to leave. I think it's time to leave. What am I doing here? It's wasted time. They'll take me to my mother's house. But I'll leave again to do drugs. I've not changed my life yet. Not yet. I'm learning a lot from others. I think. At this moment, we have plenty of time to think; I do not really know how to say it (Alfredo, field notes, June 28, 2010).

His allusions to the change of life reveal the hold of institutional discourse, which empowers young people and tends to present the transformation as matter of willpower, but it also shows that Alfredo positions himself in relation to this discourse and does not (yet) want to change his life. He somehow rebels against this imposed internment and against this injunction to change his life, which he calls a “waste of time”. Moreover, he does not deny benefiting from this situation which he knows to be temporary: a benefit that he cannot identify or define, but which is based on the idea of having a time to think about himself his choices, to compare himself to others. Beyond the therapeutic effects, in the words of Alfredo and those of other young people appear positive elements, and in particular the confrontation with others, their history, which allows young people to make sense of their own life, explain and organise. Their ability to self-relate during the interviews seemed to me to be very significant, and it is difficult not to see this as a result of institutional action.

However, some young people, such as Gabriel, have a critical view of the effectiveness of the rehabilitation process:

El Refugio seems good to me, but not for quitting drugs. Here I feel good, I'm getting used to it. I don't miss the outside so much. I read books, I spend my

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16 Jesús is an example of this because he actually devoted his life to the young people, did the training he was asked to do, and decided to live inside the centre.

time reading when they locked me in here (me *atorrillan*). That is to say, when you're punished and have to stay in this room. Because young people here talk to you about drugs, crystal, *chiva* (heroin), el *perico* (cocaine). Many leave from here and then come back, because they have tried even worse things that they heard about here. These are the same guys *morros* from here, who encourage them: try this, try this ... And after we get addicted. I have only tried the bag (*bolsa*), I do not want to become vicious (*vicioso*). I want to have something in life. I want to have my children, my wife my house and everything. And here they break my dreams. Try crystal, try this. And with that, I start thinking about it, it sticks in my mind I wonder what taste it would have, and so it works, I keep thinking that I want to try another drug. That's why it's not a good place to quit drugs (Gabriel, interview of June 27, 2010).

In this case, the relation with others is a case of resonance with the outside and with the multiplicity of experiences; instead of being a break from drug use, it acts as a stimulant. And yet, Gabriel has dreams, he imagines himself in the future with a wife, children and a house, he wants things he values. It is also because he finds himself in this universe of confinement, where boredom, when mastered, allows him to feel good, that he feels outraged by this "contamination". This reasoned critical position reveals its capacity as an actor. Things are not undergone with Gabriel, they are thought out. He remains an individual who resists the institutional constraint and the harshness of his story by forging his point of view, placing himself in a position of critical distance.

For Alfredo and Gabriel, the experience of internment in the rehabilitation centre represents a space for reflection. An opportunity to think about their subjectivity, to think about their careers, to describe their actions, but also to position themselves in relation to their desires and expectations. This introspection does not appear to be possible in life outside as described by the actors, on the contrary, there is a sense of permanent action and acceleration. The results of this introspection allowed by confinement does not always correspond to the normative expectations of the institution, as shown by the case of Alfredo. The case of Gari's seems to fulfil this expectation to a greater degree.

### **Finding your place while waiting to get out there**

I had noticed Gari as soon as I arrived at El Refugio for his supporting role (*apoyo*). He contributes to the supervision of younger residents. He exercises the same small power of the adults in the process of rehabilitation who help the leaders. He gives them permission to move from their room, to go to the toilet during the *juntas*, he keeps the silence while the one of them is on the podium to speak. The way Gari talks proves his knowledge and his ability

to handle the emotional stages of internment, because he experienced it himself. As far as he is concerned, he doesn't reveal that he was afraid, but he tells the story of his rebellion and his attempts to escape:

The first time I spent here six months, and the third month they named me "helper" (*apoyo*). I wanted to escape and they caught me at the corner... My uncles were here, and my grandmother brought me here. I arrived on December 20, four days before Christmas! I spent Christmas day here and I was angry, I spent the New Year here, I was angry. On the 17th of January I tried to escape, I got to the entrance, I quarrelled with the guard, I opened the door and ran, they caught me, they guarded me until the third month, they put me to wash the pots and the blankets, and after three months I behaved well and they named me *apoyo*. I came back on October 21, this was my second time. And on December 17 they named me *apoyo* again. I like being *apoyo*. I work on my own person, on my tolerance, on my responsibility. You cannot imagine how the kids are and how difficult is to block them from quarrelling [...]. It takes patience, you cannot hit them! (Interview of June 21, 2010).

Gari talks about his feelings about living in the centre. Even when he came voluntarily, spending Christmas locked up frustrated him. However, he narrated in an amused tone how the institution eventually disciplined him. Those who "behave badly" are confined and have to do the collective work: washing the pots, putting the blankets in their place, and so on. I asked Jesús who was washing the pots when no one was punished, and he told me that there was always someone punished. But Gari does not narrate these as episodes of humiliation: in his narrative, we find the idea of an apprenticeship and work on the self, which continues in the role he assumes as a helper (*apoyo*). He describes it basically as being patient with the younger kids and being a somewhat reassuring presence.

Gari is 17 years old and in theory he will be not able to stay at El Refugio after turning 18. However, exceptionally, if he continues his studies, a derogation from the regulation will be applied. Gari is on his second stay at El Refugio. Being older than the majority of the guests he is in charge of, but also because of his role of responsibility, he illustrates how having experienced the normativity of this institution has had an effect on his way of explaining and making sense of his own trajectory. When I ask him what he would be doing when he is grown up, music is the first thing that comes to his mind. It is an activity in which he feels "good", that makes sense for him and where he is recognised by others: for example, by his mother and by his ex-girlfriend. This is another resource that can be associated with a form of urban culture he adheres to in order to exist.

"What would I like to do?" Well, I had the passion for.... You're gonna laugh, but I love music. I recorded some songs, I have my notebook of songs, I have

made songs for my.... for the girls I was dating. But now I'm starting high school and I feel I will not do it anymore, and God willing I will stay here 3 years again and during these three years I will strengthen myself, because I want to take drugs ... That is to say I feel that I want to take drugs, but I don't want to do it (Gari, interview of 21 June, 2010).

Music makes sense for him. However, in his words it appears that, even if the institution provides him a base to think about his future, at the same time it seems to impose a choice between everything related to his life before and its investment for the future. In other words, the trap of "relapse" is still there. The school project he built within the institution seems to impose a choice on him. But later during the interview he reveals another reason for suspending his musical practice. Music stimulates too many emotions by "stirring" things inside him, and he feels unable to manage all these emotions.

But then it brings me memories and I say no! What for?! When I sing, I sing songs of things that I lived, songs in which I complain about my father and I tell him many things ... Why wasn't he there, why he never wanted to live with me? And so on. And I start to get caught up by the rage I have inside me and that's why I stopped. It doesn't make me feel good. (...) I listen to everything here in Tijuana, here there is everything... (Gari, interview of 21 June 2010).

The work of the institution on Gari's discourse is clearly visible in this part of the interview. Gari explains his choices by his origins and in particular by the absence of his father and the lack of paternal love. Phrases such as "I am not capable of being loved" correspond to marks left by the institution: the narration and the explanation of the experience is centred on the addiction and on its articulation with the emotional and familial aspects of the individual. Jesús, during our first interview, talked about the importance of obtaining information about family and intra-family relationships, as this is key for action and for understanding the "trajectory" of these children. This form of storytelling – with psychological explanations focused on individual responsibility and on the supposed fragility of the emotional ground – are dominant in El Refugio and almost the only possible discourse in the institution. In the interviews, formulas such as "I am emotionally sick", "I fell into vice", "I want to stop", "Drug is not good" were repeated several times. Such phrases can be considered a form of "secondary adaptation" (Goffman 1961). Each young person has to deal with this narrative and with the normativity of the institution, sometimes in a fragile and/or contradictory way. For some of them, it becomes a resource for identity, as it has contributed – like the other spaces of the city (Pochetti 2017) that have marked their trajectory – to an affirmation of the self. Gari seems to have found his place

in the institution, and clearly the responsibility entrusted to him and the having his rehabilitation recognised improve his self-esteem.

## **Conclusions**

This article describes the institutional and cultural environment affecting disadvantaged and addicted Tijuana adolescents believed to be “incorrigible” (*ingovernables*). I focus my analysis on three aspects of the care of these children. First, addiction treatment is linked to the specific urban context in which these adolescents live. Second, the care of street teenagers and institutional policy regarding them is supported by a pre-existing net of actors who believe it is necessary to completely remove children from the dangers of the street. Third, teenagers themselves establish a narrative within and against the institution – El Refugio – that both holds them captive and protects them.

To understand young people categorised by treatment institutions as “street children” we must take into account the weight of drug use and economy as a social factor, as well as the multi-dimensional violence of the city. Many actors and institutions within the city cooperate to limit the ability of young people to occupy a public space that is perceived as extremely dangerous but that also must be preserved and cleaned, restoring a “good image of the city” for tourism purposes. This “non-territorialisable” aspect of the city is not specific to Tijuana. Other works on street children highlight how in some cities the level of social and institutional violence is such that children can occupy public space only in an ephemeral way (Morelle 2007, Lucchini 1993). However, the fact that Tijuana is the main gateway to the United States produces a specific configuration of actors. This is revealed by the various ways in which teenagers enter rehab facilities. Some cases addiction is a pretext for managing and safeguarding teenage runaways who find themselves in wider deviant trajectories. Drug usage is directly associated with addiction and becomes the reason for the confinement of these adolescents, (even if drug use seems to be in some cases only a risky recreational activity). The care of these minors consists largely in their confinement and in the previously described therapeutic process of moralisation, the aim is primarily protective. Those who flee are not likely to survive on the streets, according to the person in charge of the minor sector of the centre.

In Mexico’s fragile democracy, the management of public policies depends on the parties and personalities in power (Estrada Saavedra 2013). The result is often fragmentary, changeable and contradictory, contributing to a depoliticisation of the question of marginal and independent childhood. This result, however, is not forged only from the top and simply executed by actors. It is shaped in a constant intersection and interaction among social

representations, public policy, institutional work, and individuals. Moral, religious, therapeutic, and social dimensions are inseparable from these intersections.

As I have shown, many institutionalised teenagers regard the experience of confinement as the price they have to pay for street life and their quest for freedom and independence. Nevertheless, their relationship to the institution is ambivalent. The rehabilitation centre is a total institution that seeks to transform individuals. By making subjects recognise their emotional fragility, it reinforces the idea that the experience of drug use is first of all, a matter of individual responsibility; the label of “addict” becomes the filter through which young people are encouraged to read and interpret their trajectory. However, El Refugio also proves to be a place of waiting, where it is possible for young people to grasp discursive, affective, normative and moral elements that allow them to (re) construct a narrative that gives meaning, that highlights the risks involved, and that allows them to assert themselves sometimes even in opposition to the institution.

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# **Yogyakarta Street Careers – Feelings of Belonging and Dealing with Sticky Stigma**

THOMAS STODULKA\*

## **Abstract**

This article focuses on a community of street-related children, adolescents and young adults, who broke away from their families and began embracing life on the streets of Yogyakarta, Indonesia. Being unprotected and homeless gave rise to spatial, social and emotional vulnerabilities and negative attributes that strongly affected newcomer children and adolescents. After being mocked and exposed to affective and physical violence during community initiation, their integration into the street-related community shifted their experiences of belonging in terms of uplifted self-esteem and wellbeing. Since emotions play a vital role in transforming the experience of a stigmatised identity, this article illustrates that identity and stigma attunement entails ‘emotional promises’ of stress relief and ‘emotional rewards’ by blending in to prevailing community ethos. The extended case study of a (now) young man’s street-related career reveals that affective bonds and community solidarity, but also structural vulnerabilities, stigmatization and afflictions can stick even after ‘exiting’ the streets, despite creative ways of coping and attuning to new (off-street) localities<sup>1</sup>.

**Keywords:** Affliction, Emotion, Stigma, ‘Street Career’, Indonesia

When I first got involved with street-related children<sup>2</sup> and adolescents in

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1 I would like to thank the collaborative research team and my friends in Yogyakarta for sharing their knowledge and time with me for over a decade. The editors of this Special Focus and three anonymous reviewers have substantially helped in finding the right words that I had lacked in previous drafts.

2 I prefer the term ‘street-related children/youth/communities’ over other concepts. The young people I have met over the years did not live and work on the *streets* exclusively. They engaged in socio-spatially complex and multifarious alternative economies and co-habitations. The term ‘street-related children/youth’ refers to those, who identified themselves with and shared a feeling of belonging to the community described here. When differentiating between ‘children’, ‘adolescents’ or ‘youths’, and ‘adults’, I do not primarily refer to chronological age, but to local perspectives on the life course. This perspective relates to ethnography-based insights that ‘children’, ‘youths’ and ‘adults’ do not necessarily form exclusive age-specific street-related communities. On the contrary, in both the *komunitas Congklak*

Yogyakarta over 15 years ago, NGO-activists were discussing the fading solidarity among Yogyakarta's inner city 'street communities'. They bemoaned an increasingly scattered cityscape of disconnected street-related communities referred to as '*komunitas*' that superseded what they described as collective street kid identity (see Beazley 2003a, 2003b). A few years into Indonesia's political reformation movement (*reformasi*) that followed the fall of second president Suharto (1966-1998) and in which many intellectuals, artists and political activists contemplated the possibility of a democracy without corruption, collusion and nepotism, delineated instead by freedom of speech and assembly, I doubted their pessimistic tone. They forecast that one day nothing might be left of the citywide street movement that had unfolded so vibrantly before my eyes during my first six months of fieldwork in 2001. I had spent three months at an NGO-owned beach bamboo hut, where together with transitory visitors (most of them children and adolescent young men that had identified themselves as either *anak Bendoro*<sup>3</sup> or *anak Congklak* depending on 'their' street-junction) we produced handicrafts that were sold to a local street art gallery. Lacking more practical skills, I offered English language, swimming, cooking and filmmaking sessions, and the children and adolescents colloquial-ised my basic 'classroom Indonesian' in return. The bamboo hut, which had no running water but basic kitchen utensils, a kerosene stove and two mattresses, was temporarily neglected by the NGO. Thus, we could engage in activities that we thought were entertaining or useful for the sometimes fifteen, at other times only two, visiting 'street kids' future careers. After three months, Monchi (\*1980, †2013), Harvey (\*1976) and Kris (\*1982), three senior *anak Congklak* asked me to join them to sleep over at their hangout near the Congklak street junction in the North of the city. 16 years later, and after almost 50 months (2005; 2006-2008; 2009; 2012; 2014-2015) of actor-centered collaborative action research (Stodulka 2015b, 2014b), the activists, scholars and young persons that have invited me to learn about street-related life, witness a radical governmental crusade against street-related communities. This continuous 'development' has peaked in 2014, when street-related activities referred to as 'busking', 'begging' or 'loitering' were prohibited by a new *Law on Vagrancy and Homelessness*. This *Peraturan Daerah No. 1/2014* legally turned

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and the *komunitas Bendoro* where I have studied with, persons of different gender, ages and life stages lived together in the same street-related communities.

<sup>3</sup> I have changed the names of street-related communities and persons for reasons of confidentiality and anonymity. *Anak* (Indon.) can be translated as 'child' or 'belonging/relating to someone or something'. In this context, the terms can mean both 'Bendoro kid/Congklak kid' or 'relating to the Congklak/Bendoro street junctions'. Similarly, '*anak jalanan*' is literally translated as 'child' (*anak*) 'from the street' (*jalanan*) or 'street child'. As '*anak*' can also indicate descent or a belonging to someone or something, its meaning as 'belonging or related to the street' seems more appropriate.

stigmatised *anak jalanan* – the Indonesian term for ‘street-related children’ (see footnote 2) – into ‘criminals’ in the wake of Yogyakarta’s agenda of modernising, regulating and cleansing the city from the ‘dirty’, the ‘poor’, and the ‘uncultured’. The former activists were right. Despite Indonesia’s so-called ‘reformation’, the laws and decrees that deny minorities basic social rights and exclude them from space and ‘society’ (*masyarakat*) are on the rise (Hegarty & Thajib 2016, Nanwani & Siagian 2017, Stodulka 2017).

This article highlights that increased marginalisation, stigmatisation, crumbling NGO-support (Pravitta 2012) and the criminalisation of street-related communities has deprived them from access to economically lucrative urban spaces of income generation. Despite this unfavorable turn of events, I intend to illustrate that their eviction from the public eye did not coalesce with a lack of mutual care and solidarity among street-related communities. From a theoretical perspective, the article contributes to critical studies of marginalised children and youth (Bolotta 2014, Brown 2011, De Moura 2002, Ennew & Swart-Krueger 2003, Glauser 1990, Heinonen 2011, Panter-Brick 2002, Vignato 2012), children and youth subculture formation (Baulch 2002), gendered identity construction, social practices of place-making among street-related communities in Yogyakarta’s city center (Beazley 2003a, 2003b, 2002, 2000, Berman 1994, Ertanto 1999), and the scholarship on Javanese subjectivities (Beatty 2005, Geertz 1960, H. Geertz 1961, Good 2012, Good, Subandi & DelVecchio-Good 2007, Guinness 2009, Newberry 2006, Retsikas 2014). Expanding on these debates, it highlights the experiences of newcomer children during and after their integration into street-related communities and focuses on the life of Kris, a former ‘street kid’ of the *Congklak* community, vis-à-vis central turning points during and after his street-related career. It taps into a neglected spot of street-related research that combines long-term action research with a focus on the emotional, physiological and socio-cultural coming of age in the context of stigmatisation and marginalities. This diagnosed ‘blind spot’ of child-centered research seems in accordance with the desiderata of other activist-researchers, for example Sarah Thomas de Benítez, who writes on behalf of the international *Consortium for Street Children*, that within

(l)ongitudinal research into ageing off or onto the streets – repeat situation analyses are useful, together with longitudinal ethnographic research – for example to explore changes in state of subjective wellbeing as children stay longer on the street (...) and to explore transitions from children to youth and adult – both on and off the streets (2011, p. 36).

The following section introduces the *Congklak* community, before the extended case study showcases that the integration into the street-related community shifted newcomers’ experiences dominated by shame, embarrassment and

humiliation to uplifted self-esteem and wellbeing. It underlines that emotions play a vital role in transforming the experience of a stigmatised and marginalised identity. Identity transformations and stigma attunement are collective endeavors of contesting and negotiating positionalities in encounters between veteran community members and newcomers. Social and cultural integration and subjective well-being are engineered through ‘emotional promises’ of stress relief and ‘emotional rewards’ granted by veterans if the newcomer children and adolescents blend in to prevailing community ethos by ways of rhetoric and embodied performance. Moreover, the long-term research perspective (2001–2015) illustrates that socially generated affective bonds and solidarity among street-related children and youth, but also the vulnerabilities related to a stigmatised identity can persist even after they have exited the streets.

### The *Congklak* community

Senior activist and anthropologist Bambang Ertanto described in a conversation in 2008 that until the turn of the century there were hardly any street buskers (*pengamen*) along the Ring Road, a multi-lane highway that surrounds Yogyakarta’s city center. In the 1990’s, ‘*anak jalanan*’ were a phenomenon of train stations and the city centre. Monchi, Harvey and Kris, who had introduced me to street life in 2001, dated the origin of their *komunitas* in 1999 at the aforementioned multi-lane city highway. A group of around 20 children, adolescents, young men and women started to build huts behind the big street junction after the nearby ‘*Street Children University*’ (Berman & Didit 1997) had closed down only a few months after it had opened its gates. With the assistance of an NGO that had previously set up the ‘university’, the *anak Congklak* founded a music band the same year and held street art exhibitions within their emerging community that was built on neglected public wasteland. Good relations with local police officers who guarded the traffic (Stodulka 2016a), the lucrative location just behind a busy street junction, the informality of the place with its comparatively loose social rules, the openness of the *komunitas*, and the safety it offered to ‘homeless’ and busking children and young adults, soon increased the numbers of the community. In 2005, the *komunitas Congklak* comprised of over 40 members. As its leader, then 25-year old Monchi aimed at attaining formal recognition for their place. After collecting the signatures of local authorities, the police, and representatives of different political parties, the collective efforts of formally adhering to the neighbouring *kampung*<sup>4</sup>’s formal rules of appropriate conduct and fostering

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<sup>4</sup> *Kampung* (Indon.): a closed social community, which is organised along strict social and cultural rules and norms of conduct. *Kampung* life is strongly ritualised and comprises of various status-related social duties and economic obligations of mutual help (*gotong*

good ‘neighbourhood’ relationships almost resulted in the community’s legal authorisation as an officially registered *kampung*.

Until one day in April 2005, when an infuriated mob burnt the whole place down after the community was scapegoated for thefts of a motorbike and an electronic water pump. After six years of growth, the community decreased in size and those who continued working at the street junction had to carve out new ‘safe enough spaces’ (Thajib 2017). When I talked to the *anak Congklak* about what they called ‘*tragedi*’ – a tragedy – most of them concluded with the words: *Ya udah! Mau gimana lagi?* – ‘Well, what’s done is done! What else is there to do?’ – an expression that was often articulated in the aftermath of challenging experiences, where there were no social, economic or material solutions at hand. Monchi, key informant and protagonist of this research, explained this trope as an acknowledgment of one’s own powerlessness in terms of overburdening experience and related it to the Javanese-Indonesian term ‘*pasrah*’, that can be translated as ‘(fatalistic) surrender or submission’.

After their little huts were burned down by the neighbouring *kampung* residents there seemed to be only one option: move on. After the incident, around 20 children (aged between 5 and 15 years old) started rebuilding their community on the other side of the street junction under the guidance of Monchi, Harvey and Kris, who by then had matured into young men. The intersection’s traffic lights and their social and spatial surroundings remained the *anak Congklak*’s primary work spaces, where they begged, busked and hawked, hoping that the window slots of cars or big trucks coughed up some spare change (*receh*). Sometimes, in groups of two or three, they entered the small city buses (or the bigger economy intercity buses, leading north to the local bus terminal, east to the cities of Solo, Malang or Surabaya, south to the city centre, and west to Bandung or Jakarta) to busk for a few minutes before they hopped off at the side of the road. Presumably a consequence of their previous eviction, the *komunitas* tried to keep a low profile. Monchi defined this careful ‘blending in’ as ‘Javanese way’ (*cara Jawa*): instead of provoking others’ attention, he explained that his *komunitas* intended to glide along (*ngalir*), practice endurance, patience (*sabar*) and respectful deference (*hormat*) to the neighbourhood and the shop owners, as well as accepting (*nrimo*) their misfortune wholeheartedly (*ikhlas*).

### **(Be)coming and leaving – A street-related career**

Kris (\*1982) grew up in a *kampung* that was located five kilometres from the Congklak street junction as the first child of Ibu Wijila and Bapak Hartono.

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*royong*). Java’s cities are both spatially and socially structured as mega-clusters of hundreds of *kampung*, which are only interrupted by commercial units and gated communities.

His mother worked as a hired labourer in the rice paddies a few kilometres north of the city. His father sometimes contributed to the household income as a hired labourer at construction sites in and around the city. Kris dropped out of school after the 6th grade (*kelas 6 SD*) at the age of 14 in 1997, whereas his younger brother Trianto finished junior high school (*SMP*) at the same age two years later. Because Kris began working at construction sites with his father when he was 12 years old, he had missed school regularly. The family's rented home was an empty three-room cemented house and contained only two woven mats, two mattresses, an old sofa, a coffee table, and an old portable radio. There were no photos or pictures on the walls that displayed family pride or history (Suryakusuma 2016). At the back, there was an empty little room, where Kris' mother cooked with firewood. Kris had finally left home at the age of 16 (1999) and joined the nearby *komunitas Congklak* without returning home soon after his youngest brother Hari was born.

### ***Becoming 'Congklak' – Shifted Experience and Stigma Attunement***

'Blending in' was not only a matter of collective attunement to marginal spaces<sup>5</sup> (Röttger-Rössler & Stodulka 2014), in order to navigate the streets and urban niches in smooth Javanese ways as Monchi had previously described above. As a newcomer to the streets, one had to work one's way into the *komunitas* first. Monchi, Harvey and Kris described their own and other newcomer children's integration into the *komunitas Congklak* as a monitoring process, in which they had to prove that they were trustworthy allies. When compared to other Yogyakarta street communities, where beatings, prolonged humiliation, mocking and also forced sex could be part of community initiation practices (Beazley 2000, Bongkok 1995, Stodulka 2016a), Monchi, Harvey and Kris described the integration into their *komunitas* as more 'subtle and smooth' (*halus*). They continued stressing that the *komunitas Congklak* highlighted Javanese values of 'politeness' (*sopan santun*) and 'mutual care' (*saling peduli*).

One evening in 2005, when we sat at the community's new 'basecamp' under the roof of the motorbike workshop where we shared food and drinks, Kris related his first encounters with *Congklak* community members. When he first tried to sit with them as a 16-year-old 'stranger' in 1999, they had turned their backs on him. They were eating rice snacks, fried chicken claws and heads, while he was sitting about three metres away under the roof of a

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<sup>5</sup> Human geographers have categorised marginality into overlapping spatial and social dimensions (Mehretu et al. 2000). From an anthropological perspective, I define marginality as also situated and contingent, "as a constantly shaped asymmetric power relationship between an often self-claimed centre and a (constructed) periphery" (Röttger-Rössler & Stodulka 2014:17).

deserted motorbike workshop. He remembered “these bastards” (*bajingan*) talking about “dogs” (*asu*), and that there were different kinds of dogs: good dogs, bad dogs, and dogs that had to be beaten up because of their annoyance to the public. At that time, he did not understand that his later friends, among them Monchi and Harvey, were actually talking about him. They started throwing the leftovers over their backs into his direction, which Kris recalled as “bone rain” (*hujan tulang*). After they had finished eating they sat down next to him. When one of them suddenly grabbed him roughly and asked what he wanted from them, Kris replied that he only wanted to sit with them. He hadn’t even finished his sentence, when then 17-year old Habib suddenly slapped him in the face. He asked Kris to eat up the bones, the rest of the fried chicken heads and feet as fast as he could. After almost vomiting, Habib gave him a local whiskey-gin-vodka-mix to drink. “It tasted awful,” he remembered. Then Kris was invited to sit and drink more of the local brew with them. They called him “a dog” for the whole evening and mocked him for becoming more and more drunk.

During the following weeks, he was invited to join them busking between the cars lined up before the red traffic lights. After a while, the joking and mocking ceased, until he himself started to pull jokes and fight back whenever he was beaten without reason. Kris defined this as a turning point, where his experience of the street junction had shifted. He claimed that he was no longer afraid (*takut*) on the streets once the mocking stopped, and that he was no longer worried being spotted and looked at while busking (*ngamen*) between the cars and motorbikes. Kris described that it was important to him not to feel ashamed (*malu*) anymore to be a *jalanan*, and that after a while he wasn’t afraid (*takut*) to be discovered by his parents, because he could feel that he had become an *anak Congklak*. He assured me that despite the initial mocking and the tragedy of eviction, life was better there. He was fit better (*cocok*) with his ‘new family’ than he did at home. *I am proud (aku bangga) to be an anak Congklak*, he closed the conversation and headed off to the neighbouring little shop to buy more tobacco, boiled peanuts and drinks from the community’s collective funds that were administered by Monchi. After enduring the liminal phase of his initiation Kris had learned to attune to the community’s ethos and act accordingly: addressing food stall owners empathically so he could get food on credit; embodying the ways of politely speaking to police officers on the streets in order to pass them without harm; negotiating with NGO-activists in order to get as much as possible out of them; or keeping members of other street-related communities at a distance through body posture and coarse language. Newcomers were continuously socialised and – at a later stage – socialised others into their *komunitas* by means of almost ritualised initiation that targeted the acquisition of a particular slang, the introduction to masculinity performances, practice of *seks bebas* (‘sex before marriage’),

working patterns, navigating localities, and learning how to reappraise adversities that exceeded their coping resources in a more positive light. The collectivity of the *komunitas* with its group norms of conduct and narratives of unlimited freedom, self-elevation, superiority and pride created a social and localised identity that they celebrated with their peers and resourcefully communicated in their encounters with others (Stodulka 2016a, 2015a, 2014b). At the age of 16, Kris turned into a master of ‘code switching’ by adapting his speech and body language according to the expectations of those he encountered in the city’s public spaces.

The long-term street career perspective aims to highlight that the subjective experience of identity attunement is closely related to the appraisals and affective practices of community veterans and leaders: “emotions play a vital role in transforming the meaning of a stigmatized and marginalized identity” (Fields, Kopp & Kleinman 2007, p. 164; see also Yang & Kleinman 2008; Yang et al. 2007). A positive re-evaluation of a stigmatised self is difficult without an emotional mobilisation by the surrounding community. The process of identity attunement entails ‘emotional promises’ of community integration and an enhanced wellbeing triggered by ‘emotional rewards’ through senior *anak Congklak*’s approving looks, words of solace or the introduction to new income generating opportunities once the newcomers adequately embodied the community’s ethos, norms of conduct and emotion display rules. The integration into the community did not safeguard the newcomers from stigmatising encounters, but it fostered a feeling of belonging that entailed the opportunity to continuously improve their skills of keeping harmful encounters at a distance and experience comfort and well-being in others. I follow Douglas Hollan’s (2009) definition of wellbeing here, which highlights its relation to socio-cultural practices of place-making and moving through space, time and various social fields of the public spaces. He writes:

all communities create zones of activities and engagements for people that affect their sense of well-being in relatively positive or negative ways. As people move through the course of a day and traverse the socialscapes around them, as they move from one location to another and engage with various types of people and activities, they feel more or less safe and secure, more or less stimulated and engaged, more or less well or unwell (Hollan 2009, p. 215).

A attuning to community action and ethos could contribute to increased well-being by converting shame and loneliness into the pride of belonging to the *komunitas*, despite its stigmatization as ‘dirty’ (*kotor*) or ‘criminal’ (*preman*). In addition to the public’s stigmatization of newcomers as ‘*anak jalanan*’, painful experiences of shame and perpetual humiliations during the liminal phase of initiation by those peers and seniors they sought to be-

friend as community members, underwent processes of re-evaluation once the newcomers felt integrated into the community. The senior community members' positive feedback on the embodiment of the *Congklak* community ethos could evoke pleasant (*nyaman*) feelings. The fear (*takut*) and shame (*malu*), which dominated the experiences of 'newcomers', gave way to more positive self-evaluations and narratives of freedom (*bebas*), happiness (*senang*) and pride (*bangga*) once they felt they belonged to their new *kommunitas* (Stodulka 2009). By observing, learning and imitating speech and body language from senior community members, power inequalities, which were previously responded to with frustration, became more contestable.

### ***Leaving 'Congklak' – Immutable Solidarity and Persistent Stigma***

Kris returned to his family's house to visit his mother every other week in the aftermath of the '*Congklak* tragedy', but he continued busking (*ngamen*) and sleeping at the intersection irregularly until 2006. The following encounters unfolded in 2007, a few months after Kris had 'exited' the streets and moved back into his family home again in order to support his mother and take up more regular jobs at construction sites. I had left Yogyakarta for a year, so my reunion with Kris was initiated by a short SMS text from Monchi, the community's leader: "Please come to my house, something important happened. All the best for you and peace on every single of your paths, Monchi." I picked up the then 25-year-old next to a little food stall along the four-lane highway that connects Java's South with the Northern coast. "Let's go!" he shouted from afar. A second later he sat on the back of my aching motorbike smiling. "Let's go, I will tell you on the road".

As we drove through little hamlets on our way down South into the city, Monchi explained that Kris (then 24 years old) had been taken to a mental health institution because he "went crazy" (*jadi gila*) six weeks prior. Monchi assumed that his 'craziness' resulted from a frequent combination of methanol, pills, and magic mushroom consumption. After he had been isolated in a 'cell' for two weeks at an asylum near the mountain resort of Kaliurang, he escaped during the warden's lunch break and walked 20 kilometres to his family home, just before he was to be transferred to the institution's third-class section.<sup>6</sup>

After spending a week with his family, Kris had recovered and seemed

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<sup>6</sup> In most Yogyakarta city hospitals, rooms were divided into the categories VIP, 1st, 2nd and 3rd class. The rooms differed in their costs, equipment, service, the quality of the treatment, and the frequency of nurses' and doctors' visits. Patients, who were treated based on the subsidised Social Health Insurance, were referred to 3rd class. In the 2nd and 3rd class section, water bottles, towels, syringes, soap, or blankets needed to be either rented or purchased. In 2nd class, patients shared a room with two to six patients, sometimes separated by curtains, 3rd class could accommodate up to twelve beds per room.

better. But for the past two days he had become strange (*aneh*) again. His temporarily improved health condition developed into another episode of “real madness” (*gila benar*), as Monchi described it. Kris’ mother had called Monchi in the morning and asked him to calm down her son and – if possible – bring him back to the institution. When I asked Monchi what I had to expect, he smiled and replied: “You have to see it yourself, it is hard to describe”.

When we reached the *kampung*, the neighbours had already assembled. They whispered in each other’s ears, some pointed their fingers at us from afar. Right after we had parked the worn-out scooter in front of his family’s house, Kris turned the corner, returning from one of his strolls through the neighbourhood. He was sweating and breathing heavily. After he had hugged me intensely, he grabbed my hand and squeezed it firmly. Monchi intervened, smiling. “I told you,” he said. Kris stared at me with his eyes wide open. He seemed to look through instead of at me. His body moved in an awkward way, almost like a robot. There was nothing left of his smooth motion and wit.

“Hey, how are you?” he asked me. “I am fine. How are you?” I replied. Kris smiled, took a deep breath, before he literally spat out his breath again only a second later (he continued exhaling and spitting every 30 seconds during our two-hour visit). Then he looked at me again and said: “Mbah Maridjan, Chris John<sup>7</sup>, West Kalimantan tribe, South Sumatra, Central Java... Chris John!” – “Yes”, I replied startled. He kept repeating the chain of words over and over again. Monchi looked at me and smiled before he took Kris by his arm. They smiled at each other, Monchi tried not to avert his eyes from him: “Do you know who this is?” Kris looked at me for a few seconds, then smiled and said: “Thomas!” He hugged me again, and we walked into his house holding hands. Kris’ mother was waiting for us inside the house. His younger brother, who was only nine years old then, and his father also welcomed us, but apologised and left the room as soon as we sat down on the worn-out sofa, which was covered with old newspapers as cushions. His mother apologised that she could only offer us boiled warm water to drink, and not tea, coffee, or biscuits. She explained that since her son had returned home the whole family could not earn an income. They had to take care of Kris and keep him at a distance from the agitated and frightened neighbours.<sup>8</sup>

Kris’ behaviour struck me as awkward in many ways. He had an incredible craving for water to satisfy his permanent thirst. When he started drinking,

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<sup>7</sup> *Mbah Maridjan*: famous spiritual ‘caretaker’ (*juru kunci*) of the Merapi volcano. Died in a pyroclastic flow during the volcano’s last major eruptions in October/November 2010. *Chris John*: Indonesian boxer (former WBA featherweight champion).

<sup>8</sup> See Robert Lemelson’s film ethnographies (2010) on afflictions in Indonesia for substantial discussions on mental health, illness, caring and healing practices.

he almost finished a whole 1.5-liter bottle of water within only a few seconds, spilling half of it over his face. His eyes were always wide open, and he started to laugh out loud during a conversation that was not funny to others, just to perform Muslim praying rituals a moment later. He stood up from the sofa, crossed the empty room towards his chamber in robot-like movements and mumbled that he had to pray (*harus sholat*). After having entered the room, he came out again after only a few seconds, sat next to us, and repeated the words “Mbah Maridjan, Chris John, West Kalimantan tribe, South Sumatra, Central Java... Chris John”. After he drank another bottle of water, which his mother had already prepared, he sat down, stood up again, went to pray, came out of his room again. He never tired of it. After my initial irritation, his mother, Monchi and I started discussing what we could do to make him and his family feel better again. His mother was in favour of treatment by a local healer (*dukun*). In case this treatment would not help, she proposed to refer him back to the clinic. Ibu Wijila was a very polite, warm hearted and – inferring from her gaunt physical posture – hardworking woman. She seemed completely overwhelmed in regards to the ‘strange’ (*aneh*) behaviour of her eldest son. She didn’t use the word ‘*gila*’ (crazy) like his friends did.

She related that she felt deep *malu* (shame, embarrassment) facing the neighbours, but she, her husband, and their two other sons were afraid (*takut*) of Kris. Instead of locking him into his room again, as her husband advised her to do, Ibu Wijila ceased working as a hired labourer in the rice paddy and looked after her son 24 hours a day. After a few days, she began to feel tired (*capek*) and had surrendered (*pasrah*). With nobody else to turn to, she was seeking advice from Monchi and the *komunitas Congklak*, because she knew that they were Kris’ best friends.

“Sorry, sorry, Thomas!” (*Maaf, maaf, Mas Thomas*), she beseeched me not to get angry (*jangan marah!*) after Kris had spilled a whole bottle of water over his head, while holding my hand, and asking me whether we would finally go to Australia to get married there. I hoped he was making fun of me, as he used to, but after he addressed me as “*Sandy*”, I realised that he was not joking. “*Ful eror*” Monchi said and smiled. Sandy was an Australian social worker volunteering for the aforementioned NGO some years earlier. Kris hadn’t stopped talking about her after she had returned to Australia in 2004. Ibu Wijila threw her hands up against her head and started laughing. “God, I surrender,” (*Ya allah, wis pasrah*), she whispered before she burst into laughter and hugged me in tears – a gesture that would have been highly inappropriate in other circumstances. Monchi and I joined in her laughter, all three of us shaking our heads. Kris smiled to some invisible person, walked to his room and prayed again. We left after two hours.

After we returned to Congklak in late afternoon, Monchi called a community meeting (*rapat*). As a temporary community member (I was in-

itiated myself in 2001 when I was asked to eat up a bowl of rotten fried chicken feet before walking the five kilometres from the intersection to a mall on Malioboro street barefoot, without money and water in the midday heat – a rather symbolic act when compared to the other's initiation), I had participated in dozens of meetings that could extend over many hours and often transformed into nightly drinking feasts. But this meeting was over after not even half an hour. Everyone agreed that Kris needed to be cared for and hospitalised again as soon as possible, even if he had turned his back on the community a few months earlier. When we arrived at Kris' house to pick him up the next morning, his mother felt relieved (*lebih tenang*), and agreed. On two motorbikes – one with Monchi and Kris, on the other Ibu Wijila and I – we drove to the Congklak junction, where eight other friends already waited in a hired minibus, pretending to go on a holiday trip to Mount Merapi. Because Kris was terrified of going back to the mental health institution, lying to him seemed the only way to get him on the bus, and hand him over to experienced doctors and psychiatrists again.

The *anak Congklak* neither mocked Kris nor pitied him. On the contrary, when we were on our way to the hospital, they cared for him with compassion: hugging him, stroking his hair, trying to involve him in conversation, and even laughing politely at his strange jokes. Only the young children, who had come in spite of the seniors trying to prohibit them, watched him from a distance and tried to avoid eye contact. When Kris saw the hospital from afar, he started panicking and raging. “*Ngamuk!*<sup>9</sup>” the smaller ones shouted in panic. Kris refused to get out of the minibus, so he had to be carried by Ronggo, Monchi, and Irianto, while he kicked his arms and legs into the air and the bundle of their intertwined bodies. After we registered at the front desk and accompanied Kris to the emergency unit, a doctor put him back into the isolation cell with the assistance of two male nurses. The cell, which looked like a small cage from a zoo, was located inside a gloomy room next to a colossal wooden chair, where Kris was subjected to electro-convulsive therapy (ECT) the week before.

The journey back to *Congklak* in the minibus was far from depressing or sad. “You will be next! You will be next!” – “No, you will be next! You crazy man (*orang gila*)! I know, why you stayed in the bus all the time, because they would have kept you there straight away! You are all crazy!” they shouted at each other, laughing ecstatically. Instead of lamenting, worrying, and discussing Kris' condition, the whole bus seemed to laugh off its disturbance collectively. When I asked Monchi after we had returned to *Congklak* why everyone was so jolly and not terrified (*kagèt*), he asked: “What else would you do? It's better to joke and laugh instead of being depressed, right?” (*Ya*

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9 ‘*Ngamuk*’ is often translated as ‘amok’, or described as a form of mental and social suffering (see Browne 2001 for a case study in a Javanese village).

*udah, mau gimana lagi? Lebih baik ngawur daripada depresi, toh').* When I asked him how he felt about the decision to bring Kris back to the hospital, he assured me that there was no other alternative. He reminded me that the community had been through very similar procedures with other friends before.

Two weeks later, Kris escaped from the hospital for the second time. He was treated with second-generation psychotics in relation to being diagnosed as ‘schizophrenic’, but he was far from recovered. Instead of admitting him into the mental health institution for the third time, the *komunitas* had opted to keep Kris at his family home, to support his mother financially and treat him with the assistance of a local traditional healer (*dukun*) and ‘therapy’ of voluntary construction work at the local mosque, which had been destroyed by the earthquake in May 2006. After some bureaucratic detours within the village, the local municipality, the *PUSKESMAS* (an acronym for *Pusat Kesehatan Masyarakat*; a governmental community health center), hospitals, and pharmacies, we received his prescribed medication for the following two months free of charge. Yet, the doctors were pessimistic concerning Kris’ full recovery outside regular psychiatric treatment.

Kris started to work at the local mosque under the supervision of the local *kiai*<sup>10</sup> who was a *dukun* (traditional healer) at the same time. Every morning, he purified Kris with water from a holy well located next to the mosque. The *dukun* was very optimistic regarding Kris’ recovery, as the water had already saved national hero General Sudirman from dying of tuberculosis just before his attack on the Dutch colonial army in 1948, when Yogyakarta was still the capital of the newborn Indonesian nation. It seemed that both the medication and the supervision of the *kiai* contributed to the young man’s recovery. Although he appeared almost healthy, his movements and behaviour were still ‘strange’ at times. Besides contributing to communal neighbourhood work (*gotong royong*) at the mosque, Kris started to work at other, smaller construction sites in his *kampung* where he was accompanied by Harvey and alternating junior community members. He began contributing to the household income. After one month, in which his mother and Monchi, as head of the *komunitas* supervised his routine medication intake, the *anak Congklak* were confident about their friend’s recovery.

A few days later, I received an SMS text from Kris’ younger brother who had been taking him to his work at construction sites in the city as an assistant. He asked whether I could stop by for a visit, because the whole family was startled (*kagèt*) again. Kris had relapsed (*kumat*). When I arrived at their house together with Monchi, Kris’ mother was frantic with worry (*khawatir*) since her son hadn’t returned home for two days. Then, he

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10        *Kiai* or *kyai* (Javan.): expert of Islam; also a leader of Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*).

dropped by the house that morning and shouted at them and their neighbours. While screaming ‘nonsense’, Kris threatened to beat up his brother if he refused to give him money.

Kris had also stopped by at the Congklak hangout only a few hours before. He had asked his friends for cigarettes, and once he received one, he broke it and began laughing hysterically (*histeris*). He repeated this ‘joke’ in every encounter. Strangers who didn’t know him became ‘angry’ (*pada emosi*) and started beating him up. After he deeply insulted his friends, who had rushed to his aid, he headed back towards his family home. They said that he was drunk (*mabuk*) and smelled of alcohol. In the evening, Monchi, 15-year old Rahman and I finally managed to find Kris near the Congklak junction. He was sleeping next to the river, where he had lived before their huts were burned down in 2005. After he sobered up, we discussed his options. Kris agreed that it was best if he went back to hospital until he felt better again.

He was released from the hospital one month later and the doctors attested his recovery. In the months after his release, Monchi, his mother and younger brother supervised Kris’ medication. He started working at construction sites again and busked at the intersection irregularly in order to save enough money to open a small shop where he and his brother sold mobile phone vouchers and second-hand mobile phones. Three years after what he himself referred to as ‘crazy times’ (*zaman gila*), Kris married a young woman from a neighbouring *kampung* and fathered two girls born in 2010 and 2011 respectively. The family live in his parents’ house, together with Kris’ mother, father and youngest brother Hari. Aged 35 years old at the time of writing this article, Kris continues working at construction sites as hired labourer. As a so-called ‘*kuli*’ (coolie), he also helps unload trucks and buses at the nearby bus terminal. When we last met in May 2015, he claimed that he had only relapsed twice since his ‘crazy days’. “Once, when I could not afford the medication, and once when I was too embarrassed (*terlalu malu*) to ask my friends at Congklak for help.” I asked him why he did not contact the NGOs that he was acquainted with, as we had initially agreed upon together with Monchi. “I feel embarrassed (*malu*) to ask for more support. They take care of the young ones, the children. I am too old.” He paused for a few seconds, sipped gently from his coffee and added in soft-spoken voice, “I am a good Muslim now. My wife and I attend the prayers at *maghrib* (around 6 pm) every day. The *kiai* takes care of us now.”

The stigma of ‘being crazy’, a ‘drop out’ and a ‘*jalanan*’ had clearly poured through Kris’ embodied experience and affected his family. But the care of Monchi and the *Congklak* community by organising his medical treatment, keeping Kris occupied, mediating paid work, and supporting his transition from the streets into the *kampung* also showed community solidarity, prolonged feelings of belonging and responsibility even after ‘exiting the streets’

(Evans 2006; Karabanow 2008). The *anak Congklak* worked towards taking off affective, social and economic burdens from Kris, his family and his new neighbourhood despite their limited resources. The long-term perspective reveals that street-related children and young adults are not isolated communities of ‘social pariahs’. They comprise a history and biography that relates their identities, social and cultural practices to the wider local society. Street-relatedness is not a fixed entity or identity, but a social, cultural and biographic continuum in which children, adolescents or adults constantly oscillate between localities and communities in order to adapt to their particular and age-related motivations and aspirations of leading a better life.

## **Conclusion**

This contribution started out with a description of the *komunitas Congklak* community followed by a focus on then 16-year old Kris’ integration into the community. It has underlined that accomplished integration and emerging feelings of belonging to the community were fundamental in establishing newcomers’ well-being and increasing their self-esteem. Being accepted as community member and feeling entitled to the social, economic and emotional resources of community protection, food sharing, collective hangouts, or shelter, countered stigma-related experiences of shame, inferiority and embarrassment.

At the same time, bearing in mind Kris’ episodes of mental affliction, this article illustrates that long-term physical and psychological endurance of stigmatising daily encounters, exposure to heat, rain, exhaust, poorly treated infected wounds, consumption of junk food, or various alcohol mélanges can socially and effectively scar street-related persons’ social and physical bodies even after they had exited the streets and engaged in ‘off-street’ careers. The article’s long-term perspective reminds the reader that – despite existing examples of successful street exits – structural forces that marginalise and stigmatise street-related children and youth can produce vulnerable social bodies in adulthood that can manifest in continued poverty circles, chronic illnesses and premature deaths (Stodulka 2016a, 2016b).

Beyond the actor-centered focus on street-related careers, the larger perspective reveals that former *Congklak* hangouts were turned into a shopping mall and a hotel in 2015. Even more, with the passing of the law on ‘beggars’, ‘vagrants’ and the ‘homeless’ (*Perda Gepeng No.1/2014*), which has been rigorously executed since 2015, street-related communities have become almost invisible to the public eye. They have been pushed into less visible urban niches and newly established ‘educational camps’ run by the local government (Stodulka 2017). Ongoing studies by fellow colleagues (Kellner 2018) reveal that spatial and social niches of street-related agency

might have been narrowed down dramatically over the years, but the creativity and solidarity of street-related communities produce new forms of resistance and ‘blending in’ to the city’s marginal spaces in unexpected ways.

To conclude, I want to advocate research into the life courses of (former) street-related children – not only for the sake of scientific understanding, but as ethnographic and experience-based evidence that contributes to ethical and sustainable governmental and non-governmental policies and so-called ‘intervention strategies’. One way of doing this might be systematic research into the lives and careers of those socially and physiologically mature persons that were showered with NGO-support, scientific interest and societal moral panic when they were still perceived as ‘children’ that needed to be protected in face of exploitative family and social structures. Throughout the years, my street-related friends have shown me that an understanding of the imaginations, desires, practices and feelings of street-related *children* is only possible if we include those persons in our studies, who have grown out of societal and scientific focus as *adults*. If street-related children paid great attention to their seniors and followed their lives even after they had exited the streets either through direct observation or through word of mouth (which they did extensively in Yogyakarta), so why shouldn’t also anthropologists and policy-makers?

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