

Portraying Society through Children

Play among the Waso Boorana of Kenya

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Abstract. – One of the few accounts on children as agents of social action in Africa is Monica Wilson's "Good Company" (1951). Following that account on Nyakyusa children and their society, this article provides ethnological material related to the Waso Boorana children (ca. 3–6 years old) of Garba Tulla, Kenya. Through their play they learn how to be social, but at the same time they develop their own social processes. They compete for social roles in their own microcosmic society. Nevertheless, their action and play only becomes meaningful in the context of the Waso Boorana religious changes through generations, since 1932. [*Kenya, Oromo, children, play, generations*]

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Ethnological and anthropological data on African peoples and also on East African pastoralists are numerous. In the case of the Boorana of Kenya, Baxter (1954) has given a clear picture of their organizational patterns and their society as such. Dahl (1979) and Hogg (1981) have written long academic works about the Waso Boorana. Nevertheless, the Waso Boorana,¹ as many other pastoralists, have been portrayed through their men and their descendancy, and lately more and more through women and their own rich ways of organizing themselves and their social and ritual roles (Aguilar 1994).

In those general representations of African societies, one particular group is missing, the children. One of the few exceptions is the solid account of Nyakyusa children by Monica Wilson (1951), where "good company" stands as an epistemological model in that particular society. Nevertheless, I must say that particular segment of society is also missing from the literature when it comes to the study of the Waso Boorana. While children seem to be there – one assumes that they are present at the community events with their mothers –, in reality they are never really pres-

ent in our writings, especially when it comes to understand a particular society. They are a kind of cognitive entities, who stand in the midst of things, but never have their own personalities. They seem to be in the middle to repeat, imitate, learn, and grow into a particular social identity.

1. Ethnological Data and the Absence of Children

The theme of children and anthropology has been explored, as it were "from the other side." Anthropologists who have conducted fieldwork with their children have written their accounts and have acknowledged the fact that their fieldwork has had different positive and negative results due to the presence of their children "in the field." As Butler and Turner (1987: vii) put it, children, "are not merely adjuncts of the researcher's persona among the research population, but interacting persons with roles, however involved or truncated, of their own. Their unique contributions to anthropological fieldwork need to be recognized."

The contributions by children of fieldworkers have been recently recognized as valuable and needed. In the case of children who belong to societies studied by ethnologists and anthropologists, that active role on their part has not been readily recognized. Those children are part of the general data, but they have not constituted particular data or case studies. While children have been the subject of study, as part of their parents' household and in relation to their kinship and social relations in a society, they have not been given the possibility of acting as "performers" and as part and parcel of a particular study. The agency of action, as it were, has in very few cases been acknowledged, or given to them.

It is in that context that I want to look at a

1 Concerning spelling, see Aguilar 1991b and Aguilar 1993a: 184.