

Drama and Advocacy: The Child Soldier Phenomenon in Iyorwuese Hagher's *Lamp of Peace*.

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Introduction

The phenomenon of the child soldier today is something that is most disturbing and must be viewed from the socio-economic, cultural and political contexts in which the children find themselves. The play, *Lamp of Peace* by Iyorwuese Hagher is set against this background after the Liberian crisis. In this kind of insecure environment, the children and women become vulnerable to the dangers inherent in such violent situations. Most of the children are often forced to join the war, while others join on their own volition. No matter the situation, a child is not supposed to be engaged in fighting any kind of war since he/she does not know the implications involved. Abraham S. Abatneh (2006) conceives a child soldier as any person less than 18 years of age who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force either as cook, porter, messenger, wife/concubine, or those accompanying such groups, other than purely family members. It includes girls recruited for sexual purposes and forced marriage. It does not, therefore, only refer to a child who is carrying or has carried arms. Abraham relates the experiences of the Rwandan child soldiers during the 1994 genocide. He notes with nostalgia while acknowledging the forced nature of child recruitment as soldiers and its terrible physical and psychological consequences and the often neglected but important aspect of the resilience of child combatants who take active role in conflict situations and employ copying strategies in order to survive.

UNICEF Publications (1996) on the state of the world's children during war situations is quite revealing.

War and political upheaval have been tearing whole countries apart...And this vortex of violence is sucking in

ever-larger numbers of children. Entire generations have grown up in the midst of brutal armed conflicts. At the end of 1995, conflicts have been running in Angola for over 30 years, in Afghanistan for 17 years, in Sri Lanka for 11 years and Somalia for 7 years. (11)

The list is endless as conflicts spring up frequently in Africa.

This paper advocates for the protection of the rights of the child as enshrined in the 1989 convention on Children's Rights as well as the United Nations Charter. The political actors of war or war prosecutors must stop forcing children into ruining their lives. The African continent has been most affected in recent times due to the spade of conflicts that have erupted as a result of the selfish ambitions of African leaders and rebel groups.

The perspective given to this paper is a hermeneutic one, that is, based on the understanding that no inspection of a work ever exhausts its meaning, that every work is potentially infinite and subject to various interpretation.

Socio-economic Conflicts in Africa

The society we live in today is an unpredictable one as crises, conflicts and wars rear their ugly heads on daily basis. In Africa, warring nations are ubiquitous and these are either intra or inter conflicts, fighting for power and positions in order to control the state machinery. At the global level nations are at war with each other for economic and other socio-political reasons. This acquiesces with Homi K. Bhabha's (1994) theorization that "our existence today is marked by a tenebrous sense of survival, living on the borderlines of the present" (1). The US invasion of Kuwait, Iraq, and Israel's recent attack on Hezbollah's stronghold in Lebanon are instances of infringement on the sovereign status of the nations under attack. This contravenes the UN charter where most countries are signatory. The African experience of war is not left out. The Rwanda-

Burundi war, the internal struggle for political and economic power in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Angola, and the racist regime in Sudan are few instances which aptly demonstrate the wide spread of insecurity in Africa. In Nigeria the civil war fought between 1967-70 is an experience that has dislocated so many plans in terms of national planning and strategizing. Furthermore, local conflict situations are also found within communities: The Ebira- Bassa Nge conflicts, youth restiveness in the Niger Delta, Ife- Modakeke conflicts; religious crisis in Kano, Kaduna, Jos, and its attendant repercussion in the southern parts of the country. These conflicts therefore, cut across ethnic boundaries, villages, nations and regions.

The Liberian civil war began in 1989 and continued until 1996 when some form of peace agreement was reached. UNICEF Reports of 1996 acknowledges that children constituted as much as 37 percent of some factions' armies. The participation of children in Liberia's civil war was characterized by a particularly high number of volunteers. Most fighters joined for one reason - *security*. Living in faction-controlled territory without a gun was an open invitation for harassment and intimidation by fighters, who often beat and robbed young boys of their food and clothes. Joining ranks was perceived by children to be a means of protecting themselves from this kind of victimization. A large number of the children were forcibly recruited. After 1993, many faction commanders began to target children in recruitment drives, prompted by heavy losses on the battlefield. These children were often forced to witness the beating, killing or rape of a family and were told that they would be killed if they didn't join. In some instances, they were forced to commit an atrocity that would sever ties with their community. This is vividly portrayed in the documentary films entitled *Return to Freetown* and *Blood on the Stone* by Sorious Samura and set in Sierra Leone. Other films which have similar scenario include: *Sarafina* and *Blood Diamond*. Thomas Lubanga Dyilo, a 46 years Congolese warlord was arraigned before the International Criminal Court at the Hague recently for recruiting child soldiers below 15 years into the war in

Congo right from 1998. Juliana Ezeoke's (2007) describes the crime perpetrated by this man against humanity this way:

Dyilo led the children to kill in ethnic clashes between Hema and Lendu people of Ituri region which also led to the death of some of such under age children. To ensure that the children had no fear for the war, the warlord was said to have drugged them, making them feel numb (49)

Writing on *Protracted Communal Conflict and Conflict Management*, Shedrach Best (2004) examines the Bassa-Egbira crisis as a case in point. He identifies certain characteristics of social conflict as outlined by Ramsbotham and Lewer to include "large scale violation of fundamental human rights, atrocities and human suffering" (9). It is obvious from the research that the prolonged and often violent struggle by communal groups for such basic needs as security, recognition and acceptance, fair access to political institutions, and economic participation are crucial factors in social conflicts.

Advocacy

Advocacy is used here as an intervention on behalf of the helpless situation of the children who cannot speak out against the injustice they are being subjugated to by the adult population. *Lamp of Peace* here serves as advocacy for the voiceless. Iyorwuese Hagher is lending his voice to other media and methods of intervention. The text on its own speaks volumes if critically analysed. Child advocacy refers to a range of individuals, professionals and advocacy organizations who promote the optimal development of children. An individual or organization engaging in advocacy typically seeks to protect children's rights which may be breached or abused in a number of areas.

Any children's advocate typically represents or gives to an individual or group whose concerns and interests are not being

heard. A child advocate will try to prevent children from being harmed and may try to obtain justice for those who have already been injured in some way. A child advocate may also seek to ensure that their children have access to positive influences or services which will benefit their lives such as education, child care and proper parenting.

Iyorwuese Hagher wrote the play while serving as a minister in the Abacha regime perhaps as part of his social responsibility as an artist and advocating for a seizure of the inhuman acts against children in Liberia. It is obvious that this call is beyond Liberia today, it is a global phenomenon. It is also on record that Nigeria has been very instrumental in mediating in the Liberian crises. The ECOMOG peace keeping force was also a brain child of Nigeria championed by Gen. Ibrahim Babangida and other military Heads of States after him. President Olusegun Obasanjo recently granted one of the political actors, Charles Taylor political asylum before his eventual release for trial at the International court. Hagher must have been touched by the plight of the children to bear his thoughts in the *Lamp of Peace*. This is in line with Bernard Shaw's *Arms and the Man* where the author decries the futility of war. Hagher, like other dramatists are calling for a rethink by man for his senseless engagement in war.

Drama

Drama is used here as a potential weapon of communication to the belligerent actors of war and other agencies involved in addressing the plight of children caught up in war situations. This is with the view to cushioning the effects of war on them. Presenting the features of war graphically has a way of impacting on the population and perhaps helps to reshaping the policies and conventions on children and may eventually lead to enforcement of the international law. The essence of employing theatre and drama is to pass across strong messages; thus it has the potential of exploring issues. Drama is used here as an all encompassing metaphor to embrace:

Scripted plays, dance-drama, music, Theatre for Development (TFD) and so on. Hagher has used the play as a means of communication in advocacy. Helen Scott-Danter (1999) explains that theatre provides a means of creating richer picture out of the issues presented. The distance which an enactment provides allows for discussion even of sensitive issues without the community members feeling personally implicated (22)

In the play-withina play context, Hagher notes through the characters of General Ado and Dr Ndu the effectiveness of drama as a weapon of advocacy: "it is only drama that can tell us vividly the causes of war, so that hearing, we shall think; thinking, we shall understand ... And understanding we shall know; and knowing, we shall stop warring; and stopping, we shall have peace" (p.13)

Lamp of Peace and Advocacy

The play is set in a hospital environment with Doctor Ndu and Nurse Comfort treating victims of war. The first patient is an eleven years old boy soldier called Doo, followed by Madam Alafia, who suffers from acute schizophrenia as a result of the deaths of her two sons, husband and daughter (after being brutally raped by some war lords). The play focuses on a senseless war between the "round faces" and the "long faces" and invariably eliciting that the heart of man is evil and breeds seeds of war. The re-enactments of the incidents of war in a play-within-a play drive home the import of the message. The soldiers are represented in the character of Gen. Ado and the War lord representing the government and rebel forces respectively. The play speaks of the futility of war. The blurb situates the message of the play vividly: '*Lamp of Peace* unfolds the gripping story of a war situation highlighting the meaninglessness of war'. The author condemns human suffering caused by war. He does not celebrate war in any form, whether it is aimed at oppression or liberation because ultimately it is the people that suffer. He advocates rather for peace based on the agonising experience of the characters. A character in the play, Dr Ndu reiterates this point

by saying that "... war resides in men's heart and built mansions there. Men become stone-hearted and thirsty for one another's blood" (p. 9). Similarly, Madam Alafia's philosophical question on why rebels as well as soldiers embark on war is quiet revealing. Having been diagnosed as a psychiatric case by Dr. Ndu, General Ado holds a contrary view after hearing the question she posed: "My pikin, make you tell me wetin make una dey fight? wetin make una dey put oil of war inside lamp of peace?" He acquiesces with the woman totally and believes that "the lamp in our hearts (soldiers) is the lamp of war. What we need is the oil of peace" (11). Madam Alafia's dilemma is a complex one based on Nurse Comfort's report her two sons went to war and never returned. Her only daughter was raped by eleven soldiers at a go until she fainted, and they slit her neck and dumped the body in the village well...Her husband had been missing for three days. Then they found his body tied to the stakes riddled with gunshots, and the words "round face" boldly written on his chest. (P.7)

It is on this basis that Madam Alafia feels humanity has not been kind to her and questions why fate has dealt a heavy blow on her despite her good disposition to humanity:

...Wetin I do wey all dis de happen sef? I dey sorry for people dem, I dey give dem chop, even sef clotu; some no get house na me dey give dem. Wetin make wey a no go fit to see my pikin im pikin? I don sow im clotu for marry before dis army people dem come do am an dem come kill am wen dey don finis... (P.8)

As in his *Lysistrata* inspired heroine in *Mulkin Mata*, the author glaringly portrays the women as the heroines in this play apart from the boy soldier phenomenon. This is because they bear the brunt of the war through acute suffering of the loss of their beloved ones: usually husbands, grown up sons and brutally raped daughters. They also take care of the wounded and the aged people during conflict situations.

The women are not the only ones left out in this; Dr. Ndu, a medical practitioner also faces the brunt of the war as he stitches shattered skulls, broken limbs, sedate wailing children, assuage sobbing mothers and comfort husbands. He discovers that in his medical career, he has not been able to practise his profession the way it ought to be. His conviction is that war situation is not normal, unlike someone who falls sick and is brought for treatment. He concludes by seeing war as another form of disease.

What an irony! I read medicine to be able to know the cause of illnesses and to treat them so that we could be healthy: healthy minds in healthy bodies. Today, after thirty years of medical practice, I have discovered the cause of all illnesses. But conventional medicine cannot stem disease. Another name for disease is war. (P.2-3)

He equally laments about the involvement of children in the war as he treats a badly wounded boy soldier who holds tenaciously to his gun even on a hospital bed. His outburst after witnessing this case is touchy:

What is an eleven year-old, doing in the war-front? Instead of pen, ink, paper or toy, he carries a death stick, killing and maiming. If he survives the war, he is not likely to survive the festering sore in his heart (p.5)

The implication of this is that the boy might end up dying and if he survives, may not be normal again. The boy may experience or suffer from one form of depression or the other. John Santrock (2004) cautions that depression is best understood as interdependence between the depressed persons and their social contexts; that is, when individuals are exposed to negative experiences, such as prolong stress or pain, over which they have no control. He concludes by saying that depression is “a mood disorder in which the individual is unhappy, demoralised, self-derogatory, and bored (356). One expects that at this age (eleven

years), a child should be in school under the tutelage of his teachers and parents, but here is a child carrying sophisticated weapons in war. The boy's encounter with Doctor Ndu and Nurse Simpa is quite revealing at the level of hardness the boy has attained.

Nurse Simpa: Now, give me the gun.

Boy Soldier: No.

Nurse Simpa: Give it, give it up!

Boy Soldier: Over my dead body! I won't surrender.

Nurse Simpa: You are in hospital, shot in the head. Right now, the bullets lodges in your skull, is slowly burning its fatal course through your brain(Pulls gun by force and both patient and nurse land on the floor)

Dr Ndu: (Grabs gun from the nurse) Give me this dangerous thing - gun

Boy Soldier: I surrender. Please, don't kill me. (3-4)

This scenario portrays the kind of dilemma the child soldier faces out there during warfare. Those that are lucky like Doo get help, but what about those who cannot be reached?. It is obvious that they would die like animals in the wilderness.

In the same vein, the re-enactment of how Madam Alafia's husband died in the hands of a boy soldier will suffice here to corroborate the point earlier raised:

Boy Soldier: Halt there!
(*He covers him menacingly with rifle*)

Husband: Yes sir.

Boy Soldier: Hands on your head.

Husband: Yes sir.

Boy Soldier: Pass word

Husband: Pass what?

Boy Soldier: (*Kicks him*) Pass word, stupid. Think you can just walk the streets like this?

Husband: My son I don't understand.

Boy Soldier: Sharrup. I am not your son, period. Now what is in that sack?

Husband: Empty.

Boy Soldier: Empty what, stupid?

Husband: Empty sack.

Boy Soldier: Empty sack, in sack?

Husband: Empty sack son, sir.

Boy Soldier: Put sack on your head, stupid.

Husband: Yes sir. (*Drapes sack over head*)

Boy Soldier: Now, march forward to the execution ground at once. You are a long face traitor.

Husband: No, my son, I am a no face...

Boy Soldier: That is long face pass word now , march on... left - right, left right (*They disappear off stage, and a single gun report is heard*) p.38-40

Madam Alafia's husband meanwhile is out to look for food that the family will eat and perhaps happens to be a 'round face'. We are made to understand through his children who left to join the war that they do not belong to the long faces: "...It is a shameful thing for our juniors to be out there fighting and defending our territory against the long faces while we are holed up with you to feed us" (p.35). The encounter between the child soldier and Madam Alafia's husband depicts the kind of 'character and attitudes' that the children imbibe when they join the war. They are as ruthless as the men, if not more and very insensitive to the plight of the people. In the African culture, a boy like that is expected to respect and give honour to madam Alafia's husband who equally qualifies to be his father.

Lamp of Peace is a strong comment by Hagher on his obsession with the term 'war' and 'the child soldier image in Africa'. From the expositional point of view, it is apparent that he hates war but in order to condemn this, he has to depict the gory sights of war. The essence is to send a message to those who are nursing the ambition to rescind the idea and thought as it does man no good.

Legal Framework for the Protection of the Child

To fully put this paper in the right perspective it is important to understand the International Convention governing the rights of the child. The convention on the rights of the child was adopted in 1989 by the UN General Assembly. This has been the review of earlier declarations of 1924 and 1959 respectively all seeking to protect the rights of the child. Article 1 of the 1989 convention on the rights of the child stipulates that "A child is recognised as a person under 18, unless national laws recognize the age of majority earlier" (2). Article 38, subsection 3 of the 1989 convention provides *inter alia* for protection of children in armed conflicts: "States parties shall refrain from recruiting any person who has not attained the age of fifteen years into their armed forces" (12). By this, it means that stakeholders would take all feasible measures to ensure that children in this category have no direct part in hostilities. They shall also ensure the protection and care of children who are affected by armed conflict as reflected in relevant international law.

A major loop hole in the article 38 of the Convention is the pegging of the age limit at fifteen which contradicts the age earlier prescribed in article 1. The constitution of most sovereign nations also peg the age of an adult starting from eighteen years. At this age it is expected that the person can vie for elective position and can also vote; be recruited into the armed forces and other paramilitary establishments; can take a wife and many other tasks as laid down in the African culture and tradition.

Article 34 of the convention also protects the child from sexual abuse or exploitation in any form. Actors in warfare or belligerent forces indulge in raping of women including under aged girls who are supposed to be protected by the international law.

Hazards faced by the Child Soldier

The hazards faced by children generally during war and conflict situations are many and varied, depending on the socio-political

context. It is an incontestable fact that the children and women are usually the worst hit. War or conflict situations therefore have adverse physical and psychological impacts on these categories. Emphasis however would be on the children.

The children die as a result of disease and malnutrition in war situations. The mass population movements, overcrowding in refugee camps encourage the spread of diseases. UNICEF reports that in Mozambique between 1981 and 1988 an estimated number of 454,000 childhood deaths were recorded and in Somalia so many died as a result of measles. The spread of sexually transmitted diseases particularly HIV/AIDS, unwanted pregnancies are the collateral physical effects of war.

Psychologically, the impact of the war leaves an indelible mark in the lives of the children. The thoughts of losing their parents or loved ones, being forced to kill these same categories, life in the bush and rebel camps, survival strategies to fight hunger, and so on are unbearable after the war for those who manage to survive. The films mentioned above capture these psychological traumas faced by the child soldier effectively. The Memoir of Ishmael Beah, *A Long Way Gone*, Sierra Leone is quite revealing about how he was conscripted into the war by government forces and made to kill at the age of 12. The likes of Beah are not many; at least those who survived to tell their stories. At the age of twenty six, he has been able to overcome some of the psychological trauma: "It almost makes me feel like you know, that this whole thing will never really get me...that I think I have some sort of inner strength that's able to outlive everything" (Toosi 1). Beah's book is a call on the society to preserve the dignity and humanity of the child and for the child soldier to know that the process of recovering from a war, having lived through it is a process that one has to do for life.

Modern warfare is wreaking havoc on the lives of women and girls, and on the health and educational services that are key to family and community survival and development. The irony is that the civilian population rather than soldiers are the main targets in war.

The assault and rape of the girl child in war situation by armed soldiers is a violation of international humanitarian law and an act which must be punished and not treated merely as a by-product of war. This is viciously displayed by the soldiers who killed Mama's daughter after brutally raping her in her wedding gown. The episode with the soldiers (War Lord) is presented below:

War Lord: ...And you, my queen, put on your dress. We are going on a long wedding trip. We are eleven in the team.

Madam: Make una no take dat dirty hand touch my Pikin

War Lord: (Slaps her) Shut up, witch. We will have her for breakfast, and then slit her neck to avoid emotional problems. P.45

The children are also forced into prostitution as means of survival. UNICEF Report (1996) on peace-keeping in Mozambique reveals that the soldiers recruited girls between the ages of 12-18 into prostitution to satisfy their sexual urge. These are men sent to protect the vulnerable but end up wrecking the life out of innocent girls. The UNICEF also gives a global picture of children casualties as follows: 2 million killed, 4-5 million disabled, 12 million rendered homeless, more than 1 million orphaned or separated from their parents and 10 million psychologically traumatised.

In Rwanda, the killing of adults alone is not enough, future generations of the enemy-their children-must be eliminated. A political commentator expressed this same feeling in 1994 before the violence erupted "To kill the big rats, you have to kill the little rats" (1) Entire generations in many countries have grown and are still growing up in the midst of brutal armed conflicts. The age long war between the Israelis and the Palestinians is a case in point. The effects of war therefore far outweigh its advantages. Hagher presents the ugly picture through the eyes of Madam Alafia, the boy soldier, Gen. Ado, the war lord, Dr Ndu and the nurses (Simpa and Comfort).

Recruitment

In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Abraham's study reveals that the recruitment of children was heightened during Kabila's armed struggle to overthrow Mobutu Sese Seko in 1996. Kabila's troops were filled with what were called 'Kadogos' (children). Since then the practice of child recruitment has continued. This has paved the way for rebel or non-state armed groups operating in DRC to continue to recruit children actively.

Similarly, the majority of Rwandan boys and girls were recruited in the late 1996 and early 1997 when Hutu rebels launched an offensive attack against Rwanda, and in retaliation, the Rwanda government attacked the Rwandan Hutu refugee camps in DRC that were the stronghold of the rebels. The total number of Rwandan child soldiers associated with FDLR (Democratique Pour la Liberation du Rwanda) armed groups are estimated to be in the region of 2,500 out of an estimated 100,000 soldiers in total.

The recruitment of the children into the armed forces were mostly characterised by coercion or use of force. However, not all were coerced to join the armed groups. The line of demarcation between the voluntary and coerced participation is often unclear. Several factors were responsible for the mass recruitment such as displacements, poverty, family separation, and non-respect to international laws by armed groups.

Conclusion

In conclusion it is obvious that Hagher is thinking beyond the shores of his country and at the same time communicating to his country and humanity in general. The human angle of his play places him on an international pedestal as a champion of the cause for the helpless and vulnerable. The issue of child soldiering can only be curtailed if our leaders, rebel groups have the love and value for human life as given by God and if man abhors materialism, greed, power and violence.

The chapter therefore proffers the following as antidote for addressing and or redressing the child soldier phenomenon:

- The minimum age of recruitment into the military, rebel group should be 18 years as enshrined in the 1989 child's right Convention and Constitutional provisions of most nations. The inherent contradictions in the Convention need to be reviewed. The change could be achieved through the adoption of an Optional Protocol to the Convention. Beyond that, there is a great need to concentrate on rehabilitating child soldiers to prevent them from drifting into a life of further violence, crime and hopelessness. The Liberian, Sierra Leonean, Sudanese and other African countries which have witnessed and are still witnessing crises should serve as a lesson for Nigeria.

- Reintegration Programmes should be taken seriously to cater for the children caught up in conflict situations as well as girls and women who are also vulnerable in such circumstances. A much more deliberate effort needs to be made to demobilize both adult and child soldiers and rebuild communities so as to offer not just respite but also reconciliation. An important part of rehabilitation must be to address the psychosocial damage that children suffer as a result of their participation in war.

Disputes may be inevitable, but violence is not. To prevent continued cycles of conflict, education must seek to promote peace and tolerance, not fuel hatred and suspicion.

The enforcement of the convention seems to be very weak. There is need for a more stringent enforcement of the Convention by the United Nations which is the umbrella body shielding it.

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