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# 1. In search of the lost kingdom of childhood

*Mohamed Kamara*

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In Ahmadou Kourouma's *Allah Is Not Obligated* (first published in 2000; republished in 2006), the child soldier narrator, Birahima, tells us that child soldiers are 'the most famous celebrities of the late twentieth century'.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, earlier texts like Ken Saro-Wiwa's 1985 *Sozaboy*<sup>2</sup> and Florent Couo-Zotti's *Charly en guerre* (1998) had already broached the topic of the child soldier. However, it was after the publication of Kourouma's novel that we saw a proliferation of books and films on African child soldiers (mimicking, as it were, the explosion of civil strife on the continent since the end of the 1980s). Attesting, perhaps, to the veracity of Birahima's observation is the popularity of Beah's memoirs, *A Long Way Gone* (2007); Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* (the book [2005] and the movie [2015]); Dongala's *Johnny Mad Dog* (the book [2002, 2005] and movie [2008]); and the novel by Chris Abani, *Song for Night* (2007). Other films include Kim Nguyen's *War Witch* (2012) and two documentaries, Neil Abramson's *Soldier Child* (1998) and Sorious Samura's *Return to Freetown* (2002). Additionally, we have seen since the 1990s the creation of NGOs, international instruments and international institutions and offices relative to the child soldier: War Child (1993), Child Soldiers International (1998), the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (OPAC), the Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict (1997) and in 2002, the International Criminal Court (ICC), established by the Rome Statute of 1998, which declared the use of children under 15 in armed conflicts a war crime.

Birahima's statement about child soldiers being celebrities raises some vexing questions pertaining to the how, what and why of the condition of being a child soldier. What is childhood? What does it mean to be a child soldier? How does the definition of childhood (legal or otherwise) square with the child's own perception or understanding of his/her place (and perhaps role) in society? Did the child have a childhood before becoming a soldier?

Each of the three major characters (Birahima, Johnny and Ishmael) to be examined in this chapter is engaged in an odyssey of sorts. Whether the journey undertaken as related in the novel lasts a few days (as in the case of Johnny) or months (as in the case of Birahima) or years (in Ishmael Beah's case), and whether the child-traveller returns home (physically or otherwise) or not doesn't change this fact: the journey has implications for the lifetime of the traveller. What are the child's circumstances before the odyssey? What does s/he do or what gets done to him/her during the odyssey? Does s/he return home and to a family? Are home and family still there and the same post-war? Was there really 'home' or 'family' to start with? What are home and family in the context of society writ

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<sup>1</sup> Kourouma 2006: 83.

<sup>2</sup> Twenty-one years later, Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* would address the issue of the child soldier in the Biafran War (1967–70), albeit very briefly. Adichie 2006.

large? Does the journey really end? What does the experience of the child say about society as a whole?

Using three first person narratives, Ahmadou Kourouma's *Allah Is Not Obligated*, Emmanuel Dongala's *Johnny Mad Dog* and Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone*, as my primary sources of reference, I will engage these and other questions in the present chapter. In the process, I hope to interrogate the larger question pertaining to agency, victimhood and the human capacity to transcend adversity, focusing specifically on how the child (or child soldier) negotiates the meandering road upon which s/he has been thrust, with no properly functioning compass, if any at all.

## 1. SYNOPSIS

*Allah Is Not Obligated*: Kourouma's story is about Birahima, an orphaned boy. After the death of his parents, and in the absence of any blood relative in his native Côte d'Ivoire (other than his grandparents), he is forced to embark on a search for his maternal aunt, who, as custom dictates, should be his new mother. The aunt lives somewhere in war-torn Liberia. A family acquaintance, Yacouba,<sup>3</sup> volunteers, not for unselfish reasons, to accompany the child on his odyssey. Birahima is all too happy to leave behind a known reality marked not only by the suffering and death of his mother and other close relatives, but by a society that has lost its ability to treat its children as children. He prefers an unknown future in Liberia where, Yacouba tells him, 'small-soldiers got every-fucking-thing'.<sup>4</sup> By the time he returns to his home country at the end of the story, Birahima, 'maybe ten, maybe twelve' years of age, has already 'killed lots of guys with an AK-47 (we called it a "kalash") and got fucked-up on kanif and lots of hard drugs'<sup>5</sup> while being abused physically and sexually by his guardians.

*Johnny Mad Dog*: Emmanuel Dongala's novel is about the eponymous anti-hero, Johnny, also known as Mad Dog.<sup>6</sup> Johnny has been a child soldier for at least three years when the book opens *in medias res* with a militia leader authorizing his fighters to loot anything they want 'for a period of forty-eight hours'.<sup>7</sup> Johnny's account is framed and counterbalanced by that of the more reliable Laokolé who shares his age. This narrative structure adds a complexity to Dongala's story that we don't see in Kourouma's or Beah's. Laokolé is a more rounded character; we have more bio-genealogical information about her than we do about the self-absorbed Johnny who, to boot, is 'drunk with blood and sperm'.<sup>8</sup> In fact, of the 319 pages of narrative, Lao has 174 pages (or 17 chapters) compared to Johnny's 145 pages (or 14 chapters). Lao grows up in a close-knit family of love and care, a family that is destroyed by the war in which Johnny is a willing participant. Lao's circumstances change throughout the story, but her name doesn't, another marker

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<sup>3</sup> Also known as Tiécoura, or new man, in Malinke: a fitting name, seeing his chameleonic ability to remake himself as the circumstances demand.

<sup>4</sup> Kourouma 2006: 37.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*: 3.

<sup>6</sup> Johnny goes through many nomenclatural baptisms before settling on Mad Dog.

<sup>7</sup> Dongala 2005: 6.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*: 240.

of her psychological stability and reliability, even in the midst of a world in constant turmoil.

*A Long Way Gone*: The only autobiographical novel of the three under study here, Ishmael Beah's memoirs are a harrowing exposé of the causes and consequences of the militarization of children. Before becoming a child soldier, Beah, like so many of his compatriots far removed from the loci of the civil war that started in Sierra Leone in 1991, lived a sheltered life: 'There were all kinds of stories told about the war that made it sound as if it was happening in a faraway and different land.'<sup>9</sup> The sight of internally displaced people in his town brought to the young Ishmael a more urgent and physical reminder that the war was actually taking place in his country. At 12, the war comes to his hometown while he is away for a talent show with friends. Ishmael is barely 13 years old when he joins the ranks of the Sierra Leone army. He would remain a child soldier until his demobilization at the age of 15. By this time, Ishmael had become a drug addict and an efficient killing machine, one for whom 'killing had become as easy as drinking water'.<sup>10</sup>

## 2. EXITING CHILDHOOD

In Sony PlayStation's *God of War*, as they embark on a journey to find a final resting place for the ashes of the boy's mother, Kratos, a Spartan warrior, prepares his son, Atreus, for what is ahead:

On our journey, we will be attacked by all manner of creature[s]. To be effective in combat, a *warrior* must not feel for his enemy. Close your heart to their desperation. Close your heart to their suffering. The road ahead is long and unforgiving. No place for a *boy*. You must be a warrior.<sup>11</sup>

Gone are the days when Atreus' mother, Laufey, protected her son from the violent and cynical world of adults, teaching him that 'not everyone is bad'.<sup>12</sup> Atreus thus finds himself transitioning from childhood to adulthood, from a boy to a warrior, with little, if any, psychological or physical preparation.

The advice Kratos gives his son as he ushers him into the new reality is the same advice, in one form or another, given to all child soldiers by those who use them as sidekicks or instruments of war. But Atreus has at least two advantages over the African children I will examine in this chapter: first, he is part giant (from his mother) and part god (from his father). Second, he is being accompanied on his journey by his father who will do everything he can to protect him.

War is the greatest disrupter of societal and personal development. This disruptive effect of war becomes even more pronounced where children are concerned. War, like most seriously traumatizing violence, forces children (combatants or not) to 'grow up' prematurely. With the killing of her father and the maiming of her mother by militia

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<sup>9</sup> Beah 2007: 5.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.: 122.

<sup>11</sup> Sony PlayStation 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

forces, Laokolé suddenly finds herself the one in charge of what is left of her family: 'No, I couldn't cry – Fofu mustn't see me crying. At sixteen, a girl is already a woman. I was now the mother of my mother, and the mother of my brother. I had to go on.'<sup>13</sup> Where the natural reaction for a child in a situation such as the one in which Laokolé finds herself is seeking comfort and reassurance in grown-ups, this is no longer possible. Laokolé applies this logic to her crying brother, almost four years her junior, when she says Fofu 'was almost twelve now, no longer a small child, old enough to help the family'.<sup>14</sup> This topsy-turvy world is no longer a place for a child. To survive, the child has to die, at least temporarily, and then re-emerge as a grown-up.

If this sudden transformation from child to parent/caretaker is dramatic, the transformation from child to soldier must be even more so, potentially carrying with it a more lasting damage to the child. Upon their arrival in Liberia, the vehicle Birahima and Yacouba are travelling in falls into an ambush set up by children fighting for Colonel Papa le Bon, who is described as

shockingly garbed . . . wearing a white soutane . . . tied at the waist with a leather belt held up by a pair of black leather braces crossed across his back and his chest . . . a cardinal's mitre . . . leaning on a papal staff . . . with a crucifix at the top . . . carrying a bible in his left hand . . . wearing an AK-47 slung over his shoulder.<sup>15</sup>

The Colonel is 'the representative of the NPFL<sup>16</sup>. . . in northern Liberia' and in charge of the 'important trafficking coming in from Guinea'.<sup>17</sup> Birahima and Yacouba, with other travellers, are taken to the rebels' 'fortified camp, a compound with human skulls on stakes all round the border and battle stations protected with sandbags' and manned by child soldiers.<sup>18</sup> The compound is a miniature town, with 'offices too, and an arsenal, a temple, living quarters and a prison'.<sup>19</sup> All who live in the camp, including combatants and non-combatants, are the colonel's captives. He is chief executive, judge and executioner. Here, Birahima is inducted into the child soldier hall of infamy, becoming part of what the boy calls 'Colonel Papa le Bon's racket': 'I was sent to the child soldier barracks where I got a uniform from an old grown-up Para. It was far too big for me, I was swimming in it. After that, in a solemn ritual, Colonel Papa le Bon himself presented me with a kalash and made me a lieutenant.'<sup>20</sup> All this happens within 24 hours of their capture and arrival at the rebel base camp.

As if it is not enough for grown-ups to initiate children into their war, child soldiers, now grown-ups in their own right and left to their own devices, recruit other children. During their pursuit of the beleaguered inhabitants of the city, Johnny, whose own entry into fighting is as matter-of-fact as it is illogical (see below), comes across his girlfriend

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<sup>13</sup> Dongala 2005: 47.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.: 4.

<sup>15</sup> Kourouma 2006: 52.

<sup>16</sup> The National Patriotic Front of Liberia, the armed group that started the first Liberian civil war (1989–96).

<sup>17</sup> Kourouma 2006: 59.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.: 63.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.: 66.

during one of their raids. Lovelita, though belonging to the tribe against which Johnny and his group are supposedly fighting, is summarily co-opted into Johnny's squad:

I'd already asked her to put on combat fatigues. There was only one spare pair of boots, which luckily fit her. She put them on, and fastened a wide belt around her waist. I gave her one of the two extra Kalashnikovs we had, and showed her how to fire it . . . she was excited and happy as a child.<sup>21</sup>

From fleeing child-civilian to gun-wielding child soldier, all within minutes.

If, for Laokolé, leaving childhood is primarily a matter of basic survival, for Johnny, it is much more; it is a means of becoming a grown-up and enjoying the privileges that come with that. He exposes this reality as he contemplates his rape of Tanya Toyo, a TV anchor he had met a few years earlier:

Three years before, when we met at the Malian shop, my biggest dream was that she'd take me in her arms and comfort me like a big sister. Because at the age of twelve you think of a beautiful woman as being like a mother, the only difference being that the beautiful woman is nicer and you can tell secrets to her that you'd never share with your mother. Now I was no longer a kid; at almost sixteen, I was a man. I knew what you could do with a chick, what you *ought* to do with a beautiful chick, even a chick two or three times older than you, like TT.<sup>22</sup>

Children, it is often said, want to grow up fast. War certainly accelerated that desire for Johnny.

Ishmael, for his part, presents a powerful description of his baptism of fire. A short while after their arrival at the makeshift government military camp, Ishmael and other recruits were given Kalashnikovs. Then they received new clothes and shoes:

I took off my old pants, which contained the rap cassettes. As I was putting on my new army shorts, a soldier took my old pants and threw them into a blazing fire that had been set to burn our old belongings. I ran toward the fire, but the cassettes had already started to melt. Tears formed in my eyes, and my lips shook as I turned away.<sup>23</sup>

To understand Ishmael's reaction to the burning of the music tapes is to appreciate the significance of rap music in the boy's life. Throughout his journey up to this point, rap music had been Ishmael's anchor. In fact, the reason he and his friends left home (Mogbemo) for Mattru Jong was to participate in a talent show involving singing and dancing to rap music. As they flee one attack after another, gradually losing elements of their previous life, rap music (represented in the physical tapes) becomes a saving grace for Ishmael and his friends. Rap music saves their life at least on one occasion. At a village where the small group is mistaken for mercenaries and called 'little devils'<sup>24</sup> (this was before he becomes a soldier), Ishmael has to mime and dance to the 1991 Naughty by Nature song 'OPP' in order to prove they are indeed children, not devils.<sup>25</sup> Clearly, the tapes are the last physical

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<sup>21</sup> Dongala 2005: 74–5.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*: 23.

<sup>23</sup> Beah 2007: 110.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*: 66.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*: 67.

vestiges of his childhood. With them now gone, and Ishmael clad in his new military accoutrements, the barely 13-year-old boy has finally exited the realm of childhood.

Of the three boys, Ishmael is the one most reluctant to become a soldier. Before he convinced himself of the need to avenge the death of his family in the hands of rebels,<sup>26</sup> his unpreparedness, psychological and physical, for his inevitable participation in combat becomes an emotional weight to be cast aside. After their capture by government soldiers, Ishmael sees:

four men lying on the ground, their uniforms soaked with blood. One of them lay on his stomach, and his eyes were wide open and still; his insides were spilling onto the ground. I turned away, and my eyes caught the smashed head of another man. Something inside his brain was still pulsating, and he was breathing. I felt nauseated. Everything began to spin around me.<sup>27</sup>

A soldier close to Ishmael tells him he ‘will get used to it, everybody eventually does’.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, with the help of drugs and indoctrination, killing becomes second nature to the boys. For kids who had at best only played with a ‘toy gun made out of bamboo’<sup>29</sup> before the war, war becomes a shortcut to adulthood and its accompanying paraphernalia. The consequences inherent in this rushed transition could be real and immediate, as shown in this example of Kik, one of Birahima’s friends: during one of their attacks, the ‘cunning child soldier took a shortcut’ and ‘stepped on a mine’. Kik was left alone by his squad (his newfangled family) ‘dying, in the middle of the afternoon in some fucked-up village, to the tender mercies of the villagers’ they had just attacked.<sup>30</sup> No amount of cunning can help him now. In the context of child militarization, the road to adulthood is paved with snares. One way or the other, the child will die.

A major consequence of children’s direct participation in conflict is the way the violence transforms them, making them unrecognizable even to their own acquaintances. A good example of this is seen in *Johnny*. Johnny recognizes his girlfriend, Lovelita, in a crowd of fleeing refugees. However, Lovelita doesn’t recognize Johnny: ‘I must confess she didn’t recognize me when she saw me approach. She was afraid, I suppose – she thought I was one of those brutes who wanted to rape her.’<sup>31</sup> Similarly, in their quest for a safe haven from the war, Ishmael and his friends are shunned, called devils and monsters and beaten up by grown-ups they encounter. An old man in an abandoned village (the other villagers had left their homes upon hearing a band of boys was heading their way) reminds them: ‘My children, this country has lost its good heart. People don’t trust each other anymore. Years ago, you would have been heartily welcomed in this village. I hope that you boys can find safety before this untrustworthiness and fear cause someone to harm you.’<sup>32</sup> They have become victims of the death of trust.

At the end of William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*, Ralph, one of the novel’s central characters, ‘wept for the end of innocence, the darkness of man’s heart, and the fall

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.: 124.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.: 100.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.: 111.

<sup>30</sup> Kourouma 2006: 90.

<sup>31</sup> Dongala 2005: 73.

<sup>32</sup> Beah 2007: 56.

through the air of the true, wise friend called Piggy'.<sup>33</sup> Golding's 1954 allegorical tale,<sup>34</sup> one of the most popular novels of all time, is a story about a group of pre-adolescent British schoolboys stranded on a Pacific island, after their plane crashed. Far from 'civilization' and the supervision of adults, the boys are on their own. Before long, they begin to resemble the adults of the so-called civilized society they have left behind; splitting up into factions and hunting each other down like wild animals. Ralph's realization of the death of their innocence comes just before their rescue by officers of the British Navy, only to be taken back into civilization and its endless wars. According to Harold Bloom, '[t]hrough *Lord of the Flies* is a moral parable in the form of a boys' adventure story', it is much more about war, 'the dreadful gift adults keep presenting to children'.<sup>35</sup> We see a similar reaction to Ralph's from Laokolé. Upon seeing Johnny and his friends driving the truck belonging to her friend's family, Laokolé concludes that Melanie (her friend) has been killed together with her family: 'I wept uncontrollably . . . I'm not sure whether I was crying for my friend or for that boy, whom I didn't even know. I think I was weeping for both of them.'<sup>36</sup> It is all the same, for both the child victim and the child perpetrator. Even the perpetrators are not completely oblivious to their own fall from innocence. After killing a little boy whom they consider an enemy spy and eating some of the bananas he was selling, Johnny describes the reaction of his squad: 'the whole bunch of us burst out howling, unable to contain ourselves . . . for some reason Lovelita's laughter turned into racking sobs. Only Piston, who'd stayed in the car, didn't laugh. He gazed at us with a puzzled air, as if we had suddenly gone mad.'<sup>37</sup>

### 3. THE OXYMORON

According to both the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (including its Optional Protocol) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, a child is anyone below the age of 18. Whereas the African Charter sets this age – 18 – as the minimum age for recruitment and participation in armed conflict, the CRC and OPAC adopt lower thresholds: 15 is the minimum age under the CRC for recruitment and participation, whilst the OPAC requires states to raise the age to at least 16 for voluntary recruitment into state armed forces and sets 18 as the minimum age for compulsory recruitment and direct participation. It also prohibits the recruitment or use in hostilities of under-18s by non-state armed groups. The Rome Statute, like the CRC, uses the age of 15 as the benchmark, making the recruitment or use of children under 15 in hostilities a war crime. Despite these legal anomalies, there is widespread agreement amongst humanitarian and

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<sup>33</sup> Golding 1954: 202.

<sup>34</sup> Golding's novel is a parody of R.M. Ballantyne's *The Coral Island* (1858), a novel that 'presents a romantic vision of three boys who, without the conventions of society, are still able to usefully work together for each other's good and against the savage forces that threaten them. Golding shatters this illusion in *Lord of the Flies*. Without rules and without adult guidance, Golding's boys demonstrate the evil within.' Presley 2017.

<sup>35</sup> Bloom 2008: 1.

<sup>36</sup> Dongala 2005: 55.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*: 78.

human rights advocates that 18 should be the threshold for the recruitment and use of children in armed conflicts (the 'Straight-18' approach), and efforts are afoot to bring international law in line with this approach. Given this consensus, the terminology child soldier (and all its avatars) is an oxymoron. In all three texts under study, the writers and their characters grapple with the notion of childhood and the confusion that accompanies the treatment and participation of children in armed conflicts.

In *Allah Is Not Obligated*, the first real victim of war Birahima sees is a child soldier called 'Captain Kid'. Kid, like other children, has been used as a decoy against convoys transporting civilians through war zones. Earlier, even before arriving in Liberia, Birahima insists on the difference between 'child soldiers and real soldiers',<sup>38</sup> pointing out, in the process, the nomenclatural anomaly. The physicality of this anomaly becomes evident in his description of the child fighters he encounters and works with, children usually used as expendable props to lure convoys into traps:

A four-by-four comes out of the forest . . . full of kids, child soldiers, small-soldiers. Kids about this tall . . . as tall as an officer's cane. Child soldiers showing off, their kalashes, their AK-47s, slung over their shoulders, all dressed in . . . parachute gear way too big for them, so the uniforms are falling down round their knees, and they're swimming in them.<sup>39</sup>

Children and their childhood disappearing under the weight of the rules of adult games they did not make.

The *nom de guerre* of one of Johnny's comrades, 'Twin-head' or 'Amphisbaena',<sup>40</sup> captures eloquently the nature of the child soldier. An entity with an unresolved identity, bestriding two separate worlds like an overgrown seedling. We see a similar conundrum in Johnny's confusion regarding Laokolé's unconventional behaviour during their encounter at the end of the book. As noted earlier, circumstances have forced the 16-year old Lao to become and behave like a grown-up, assuming full responsibility for what remains of her family. Not sure what to make of her, Johnny refers to Lao as a 'strange woman, strange girl',<sup>41</sup> recognizing at once her natural childhood and her premature womanhood. Ishmael Beah proclaims a final indictment on the contradictory notion when he reminds participants at a UN conference in New York: 'I have been rehabilitated now, so don't be afraid of me. I am not a soldier anymore; I am a child.'<sup>42</sup>

Even with their own childhood upended by circumstances mostly beyond their control, both Johnny and Lao sometimes forget that they are still children. Ironically, we see in this disconnect (when they talk about other children as if they themselves were grown-ups) that their notion of what constitutes a child cannot be totally erased. At the refugee camp, Laokolé observes: 'All around me were emaciated children with swollen bellies, discolored hair, limbs puffy from edema, faces prematurely aged with malnutrition and hunger. It was hard for me to look at those girls and boys who had been robbed of their childhood.'<sup>43</sup> This is particularly telling in Johnny's case, who, of the three child soldiers, is the farthest

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<sup>38</sup> Kourouma 2006: 44.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.: 46–7.

<sup>40</sup> Dongala 2005: 39.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.: 312.

<sup>42</sup> Beah 2007: 199.

<sup>43</sup> Dongala 2005: 294–5.

removed from childhood (both in terms of age and attitude). Forced, among other things, to negotiate with UN officials<sup>44</sup> and to kill without remorse, Johnny has not forgotten the difference between a child-victim and a soldier-perpetrator. Talking about the little boy his squad has captured and declared an enemy spy, Johnny acknowledges the boy was 'just a kid' though that does not stop him from eliminating him, for, he remarks, 'kids are often used as spies'.<sup>45</sup>

## 4. REASONS CHILDREN JOIN ARMED FORCES

As Mark Drumbl warns, we should not regard the child soldier phenomenon, as contradictory as it is, 'simply as an anachronism'.<sup>46</sup> All over the world, for as long as we can remember, children have been recruited to fight in wars by state and non-state actors; not that the line separating these two is always clear-cut, especially in failed states where governments change hands the same way a corrupt functionary changes cars.<sup>47</sup>

What makes this oxymoron of the child soldier possible? In other words, why do children become soldiers?

### 4.1 The Failure of the State

Real-life child soldiers are not the hapless boys in the novels of Ballantyne and Golding who find themselves marooned on a tropical island, left to their own devices, forced to figure out how to govern themselves. The main reason children join armies is because adults want them to and let them, either through force or through the dereliction of their responsibility, voluntary or otherwise, to protect children and their childhood. Acknowledging progress made towards adherence to the Straight-18 standard, Child Soldiers International laments the fact that states 'that still allow child recruitment in law tend to be relatively affluent and democratically controlled'.<sup>48</sup> These same countries, including G7 states,<sup>49</sup> 'capitalise on the social, economic and psychological vulnerabilities of disadvantaged adolescents to meet recruiting targets'.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, and with particu-

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.: 131–3.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.: 77.

<sup>46</sup> Drumbl 2012: 1.

<sup>47</sup> The distinction between state and non-state became so irrelevant during the Sierra Leone Civil War (1991–2002) that the neologism 'sobel', 'soldier-by-day, rebel-by-night' (Feldman and Arrous 2013: 67), was coined by Sierra Leoneans who could no longer tell state soldier from non-state soldier. While the term 'sobel' may have originated during the civil war in Sierra Leone, the phenomenon of what Ali Mazrui called back in 1973 'the lumpen militariat' or a 'class of semi-organized, rugged, and semi-literate soldiery' (Mazrui 1973: 1) had already presented itself decades back in the late 1960s. In the case of Sierra Leone, Jimmy Kandeh notes that the "'Sobelisation" of the national army, or the transformation of army regulars into brigands and armed robbers, can be traced to the mode of recruitment in the security apparatuses of the state' (Kandeh 1999: 362) that took place between independence in 1961 and the onset of the civil war in 1991.

<sup>48</sup> Child Soldiers International 2018a: 2.

<sup>49</sup> See also Crilley in this volume; Hanson and Molima in this volume.

<sup>50</sup> Crilley (in this volume) provides a comprehensive critique of recruitment practices by the British Army.

lar reference to the issue of Straight-18, the organization notes that the ‘reluctance thus far of these powerful states to embrace the Straight-18 standard themselves diminishes their credibility when prescribing that same standard elsewhere, and so frustrates efforts across the world to eliminate the use of child soldiers’.<sup>51</sup> If states deemed respectful of the rule of law still recruit children, it is not difficult to see how easy it is for less democratic states or armed groups to use children in armies.

What is it that makes children a prime target for state and non-state recruiters? Child Soldiers International points out that children are ‘more compliant and easier to manipulate’.<sup>52</sup> This question of the malleability of children receives special mention in Hannah Arendt’s 1954 essay, ‘The Crisis in Education’. Referring particularly to totalitarian regimes in Europe, she asserts:

The role played by education in all political utopias from ancient times onward shows how natural it seems to start a new world with those who are by birth and nature new . . . For this reason, in Europe, the belief that one must begin with the children if one wishes to produce new conditions has remained principally the monopoly of revolutionary movements of tyrannical cast which, when they came to power, took the children away from their parents and simply indoctrinated them.<sup>53</sup>

Outside this sinister motivation, other reasons emerge.

Both the UN Convention and the African Charter recognize the responsibility of the family and the state to their children. Because children, through no choice of their own, tend to be placed at the front and centre of society’s future, the inability or unwillingness of the state to protect the family, and the family the child, always spells doom for the entire society. In its preamble, the CRC is ‘convinced that the family, as the fundamental group of society and the natural environment for the growth and well-being of all its members and particularly children, should be afforded the necessary protection and assistance so that it can fully assume its responsibilities within the community’. For its part, the African Charter in its preamble recognizes ‘that for the full and harmonious development of his personality, the child should grow up in a family environment in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding’, and to achieve this ‘requires legal protection in conditions of freedom, dignity and security’. The state’s basic responsibility then is to ensure the safety of its children, to provide an environment in which they can thrive. In *Johnny Mad Dog*, while talking about her friend, Melanie, Laokolé laments the condition of the child: ‘Yet again, our shitty country had killed one of its children . . . What kind of country kills its children in cold blood?’<sup>54</sup> Decrying the failure of the state in regard to the child’s development within a family, Laokolé offers her personal story:

If I’d gone to America, I would have been in college now, since my grades had always been good. But no – at sixteen, I’d had to flee the bullets on the very day I was due to take my baccalaureate exam, and here I was, shipwrecked in the middle of the rain forest, with no father, no mother, no brother. What had I done to deserve this? I cursed my country and its politicians . . .<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Child Soldiers International 2018a: 5.

<sup>52</sup> Child Soldiers International 2018b.

<sup>53</sup> Arendt 1961: 176–7.

<sup>54</sup> Dongala 2005: 55.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*: 268.

Since Lao comes from a loving and caring family, and with both parents now dead thanks to the war, the state here becomes the main culprit for the potential underdevelopment of the child, not having been able to provide the ‘conditions of freedom, dignity and security’ necessary to her ‘full and harmonious development’.

Beyond the failure of the state (but inextricably linked to it), other factors motivate children to take up arms: ‘Some children choose to join a military organization as a route out of poverty, for protection, or as a way of making up for the loss of family or a lack of education.’<sup>56</sup>

## 4.2 The Family Is Gone, Long Live the Family

The family as a biological and social unit is at once an antidote to chaos and an easy target of it. The African family, says Dayo Olopade in *The Bright Continent*, is the original social network, ‘one of the oldest non-state networks in Africa’.<sup>57</sup> Expanding on this observation, Olopade notes that the ‘first feature of Africa’s Family Map is not charity, but solidarity. Family is grounded in positive affiliation – recognizing yourself in those around you’.<sup>58</sup> Society is the aggregate of concentric circles (a network of relations and connections), with the family situated at its core. Preserving the family is indispensable to preserving the future of a people. Blacks survived in America during slavery thanks mainly to their ability to preserve the family, against all odds. The slave masters did everything to damage the integrity of the black family, knowing that if they could do this, their stranglehold on enslaved blacks would be that much firmer. One needs only peruse the slave narratives to get a good sense of this.<sup>59</sup> When the core of society (the family) is infected, the rest of society gets seriously sick. More specifically, when the child no longer feels the ‘positive affiliation’, no longer recognizes herself in those around her, that child becomes easy prey to outside maleficent forces.

The disintegration of Birahima’s family is the single most important catalyst for the child’s enlistment. Early on in his story, Birahima gives us a glimpse into his future’s possible course: ‘Before I went to Liberia, I was a fearless, blameless kid. I slept anywhere I wanted and stole all kinds of stuff to eat. My grandmother used to spend days and days looking for me: that’s because I was what they call a street kid.’<sup>60</sup> Something was already broken with Birahima before he ran into armed groups. His father, ‘an important farmer and a devout believer who always made sure that maman had enough to eat’, passed away when Birahima was still a baby.<sup>61</sup> His mother, whom he ‘only ever got to see . . . lying down or crawling around on her arse’ though she used to be as ‘pretty as a gazelle, as a *gouro* mask’ before her excision, died ‘after thirty years of shit and stink, of smoke from the

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<sup>56</sup> Child Soldiers International 2018b.

<sup>57</sup> Olopade 2014: 90.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*: 70.

<sup>59</sup> Stephen A. Berrey makes a similar case in relation to the black family in Jim Crow Mississippi: ‘the black family – including not only parents but additional relatives, neighbors, and other adults in the community – functioned as a critical institution for protecting children from racial violence and for planting the seeds of subversion’ (Berrey 2009: 66)

<sup>60</sup> Kourouma 2006: 5.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*: 24.

hearth and suffering and tears'.<sup>62</sup> In a shocking display of adult and societal irresponsibility, the neighbourhood imam appears to blame the child for his mother's death by telling him he 'had not been kind' to her,<sup>63</sup> creating a feeling of guilt in the child that never leaves him. Birahima's grandmother and stepfather, Balla, take him under their wing. However, even though Birahima loves Balla and spends all his time with him,<sup>64</sup> the grandmother is worried the child is not getting a proper education by hanging out with the pagan Balla: 'She wanted to send me away, far from Balla, because she was afraid I would grow up to become a Bambara kaffir *feticheur*, and not a proper Malinké who performs the five daily prayers.'<sup>65</sup> Consequently, she and the rest of the family decide Birahima should go to his aunt, Mahan, in Liberia, where he 'would have rice and meat with *sauce graine* to eat'.<sup>66</sup> It is during his journey to Liberia, accompanied by a man who feeds him dithyrambic accounts of child soldiers getting everything they want,<sup>67</sup> that Birahima is captured and conscripted.

In the midst of the war that has supporters of the 'Movement for the Democratic Liberation of the People, the MFDLP . . . fighting against the partisans of the Movement for the Total Liberation of the People, the MFTLP',<sup>68</sup> commandos of the MFLDP come to Johnny's neighbourhood to recruit fighters. Johnny and his neighbours argue that there is no real difference between the two parties – 'frankly, it was six of one and half a dozen of the other. Why should we take sides?'<sup>69</sup> Consequently, the recruiters change tactics and tell the audience that the leader of the MFDLP was from their region, 'so his party was automatically' their party, and that 'any man or woman who was against him was a traitor'.<sup>70</sup> The apparent leader of the recruiters, a man Johnny had 'never seen',<sup>71</sup> shows them colour photos of alleged Dogo-Mayi victims of the ruling Mayi-Dogo party. Johnny, like many others, remains sceptical: 'We'd never lived our lives in tribal terms. Besides, wasn't my current girl a Mayi-Dogo? I adored her.'<sup>72</sup> However, when the leader of the group tells them he was a doctor and professor, Johnny, who has 'great respect' for intellectuals, is sold, thus exposing his gullibility: 'I wouldn't hesitate to put my faith in the intellectual. With so much knowledge in their heads, people like that couldn't possibly lie.'<sup>73</sup> Johnny is the first to enlist. He immediately becomes the second-in-command of his assigned group and is placed in charge of recruiting young people in his district and surrounding villages, 'by force, if necessary'.<sup>74</sup> At this time in his life, the teenage Johnny seems to be living by himself.

As noted already, we have scant details about Johnny's prehistory, except that before joining the militia, he was 'a member of the Society of Ambiancers and Persons of

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.: 11.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.: 24.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.: 22.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.: 28.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.: 28.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.: 37.

<sup>68</sup> Dongala 2005: 83.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.: 84.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.: 85.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.: 86.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.: 87.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.: 88.

Elegance, one of the kings of SAPE – those nightclub patrons and arbiters of taste, always dressed in the height of fashion'.<sup>75</sup> We also know that he worked as a day labourer at a local market. We know all of Johnny's names, yet we do not know his real name, and we have no information about his family, except a passing reference to his grandfather and his grandfather's wife.<sup>76</sup> The absence of these biographical details is as telling as the copious information we have about the family of Laokolé, his counter-narrator.

Unlike Birahima and Johnny, Ishmael – the only one to be orphaned by armed fighters – is forced to pick up arms. He is 13 years old. During their seemingly interminable journey to escape the fighting, Ishmael and his friends get confirmation that their families are in a village on their path. Ishmael's elation at the prospect of reuniting with his parents and brothers is short-lived. Just before they enter the village, rebels attack it and kill everyone there, burning the entire village. Ishmael watches, helpless, as the rebels, two of whom looking just 'slightly older than' him, celebrate their carnage by 'laughing and giving each other high fives' and playing 'cards'.<sup>77</sup> Ishmael and his friends have to flee for their own lives from the same group of rebels. After running for hours and walking for days, they are rounded up by government soldiers. Back at their base, the leader of the soldiers, Lieutenant Jabati, tells Ishmael and the villagers that they have the choice to join them in their fight against the rebels or go without rations and leave the village.<sup>78</sup> To discourage them from thinking of escaping, he shows them the bullet-ridden bodies of a man and his son, freshly killed by the rebels as they tried to leave the village. He then proceeds to describe, in gruesome detail, how the rebels kill their victims. He concludes: 'They have lost everything that makes them human. They do not deserve to live. That is why we must kill every single one of them. Think of it as destroying a great evil. It is the highest service you can perform for your country.' 'All of us hated the rebels', Ishmael reports.<sup>79</sup> Ishmael eventually joins the government forces, albeit reluctantly. The night following their first combat training, back in his tent, Ishmael begins to 'visualize scenarios of shooting or stabbing a rebel'. In a re-enactment of what rebels did to his family, he imagines 'capturing several rebels at once, locking them inside a house, sprinkling gasoline on it, and tossing a match'.<sup>80</sup> By and by, Ishmael becomes a cruel and fearless soldier, eventually attaining the 'rank of junior lieutenant', an achievement he celebrates 'with more drugs and war movies'.<sup>81</sup>

Every child is a person, every person comes from somewhere and has a story. Birahima tells us that because child soldiers are 'the most famous celebrities of the late twentieth century. . . . whenever a child soldier dies, we have to say a funeral oration. That means we have to recount how in this great big fucked-up world they came to be a child soldier'.<sup>82</sup> Birahima goes on to provide the biographies of child soldiers, both boys and girls. Every single oration is of a child who has been failed by his or her family, making them prime

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<sup>75</sup> Dongala 2005: 315.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*: 236.

<sup>77</sup> Beah 2007: 96.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*: 106.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*: 108.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*: 113.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*: 125.

<sup>82</sup> Kourouma 2006: 83.

candidates for militarization when the opportunity presents itself. One particularly touching case is that of a girl soldier named Sarah. Given away to a relative by her sailor father after the death of her mother, abandoned by that relative, then exploited, beaten, raped, by others, Sarah, 'pretty as four girls put together', ended up wielding a gun while smoking 'enough hash for ten'.<sup>83</sup> Wounded accidentally by another child soldier and now useless to the cause, she is left alone in the forest at the mercy of 'the army ants and the vultures'.<sup>84</sup> As noted earlier, before becoming a child soldier, Birahima himself was a street kid.

After the monumental failure of state and family, what recourse does the child have? Birahima asks this question during his oration for a boy named Kik: 'when you've got no one left on earth, no father, no mother, no brother, no sister, and you're really young, just a little kid, living in some fucked-up barbaric country where everyone is cutting everyone's throat, what do you do?'<sup>85</sup> In his effort to recruit Ishmael and his friends into his squadron, Lieutenant Jabati tells them: 'Some of you are here because they have killed your parents or families, others because this is a safe place . . . This is your time to revenge the deaths of your families and to make sure more children do not lose their families.'<sup>86</sup> After the family has been destroyed, it has to be rebuilt somehow. In times of conflict, armed groups step in to fill the void, because nature, as the saying goes, abhors a vacuum. A rebel leader in *War Witch* tells his child recruits; 'Respect your guns. They are your new mother and father.'<sup>87</sup> Just after the ambush that lands them in Colonel Papa le Bon's camp, Birahima starts to cry for his aunt while saying he wants to be a 'small-soldier'. A child soldier with a machine gun tries to stop him from crying. However, the colonel stops that child: 'Colonel Papa le Bon stopped the kid and came over and patted my head like a proper father. I was happy and proud as a Senegalese wrestling champion . . .'<sup>88</sup> Similarly, for Ishmael, Lieutenant Jabati represents something more than the mastermind of their collective security. He becomes a father figure to him, asking him if he has enough to eat and discussing Shakespeare with him. For children who have lost their parents, gestures of kindness from total strangers can carry great emotional power. It is true that the pact – 'we made a pact that no matter what, we will try and stay together'<sup>89</sup> – that binds fighters together is an artificial one built on fear, and that what ends up becoming their family in situations of conflict is a perverted surrogate of the one they have lost.<sup>90</sup> But this matters little to children in quest of belonging.

To underscore the importance of family (real or surrogate), it suffices to show what happens to Ishmael and one of his friends. After their rehabilitation, Ishmael and his companions have to be repatriated to their families. Since both his parents are dead, an

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid.: 82.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.: 86.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.: 90.

<sup>86</sup> Beah 2007: 106.

<sup>87</sup> Nguyen 2012.

<sup>88</sup> Kourouma 2006: 52.

<sup>89</sup> Beah 2007: 116.

<sup>90</sup> This is evident in Ishmael's fear after the May 1997 AFRC/RUF coup that toppled the elected government of Ahmed Tejan Kabbah: 'I knew I would risk running into my former military friends, who would kill me if I told them I wasn't part of the war anymore.' Months before the coup, Ishmael had been decommissioned and had already gone through rehabilitation and repatriation. Ishmael had no intention of returning to his child soldiering days. Ibid.: 204.

uncle takes Ishmael in. The uncle tells him, ‘You are my son. I don’t have much, but I will give you a place to sleep, food, and my love.’<sup>91</sup> Things every child needs. In Freetown, Ishmael resumes his schooling; he even travels to New York to talk to the UN about war and children in Sierra Leone. Conversely, a friend of Ishmael’s, Mambu, returns to the frontlines because his family refuses to take him back.

### 4.3 School’s Out

In the reference to her interrupted schooling above, Laokolé touches on a recurring theme of war narratives about children: the role of schools and education in the development of the child, or lack thereof. The educational system, and with it the education of the child, is usually one of the first victims of war. Whether in times of peace or during war, the absence of schools, or proper education, is a good prelude to children joining armed groups. This disruption or devalorization of education can create a vicious cycle of delinquency among children. ‘I didn’t get far at school’, Birahima tells us. ‘I gave up in my third year in primary school. I chucked it because everyone says education’s not worth an old grandmother’s fart any more . . . because nowadays even if you get a degree you’ve got no hope of becoming a nurse or a teacher in some fucked-up French-speaking banana republic.’<sup>92</sup> Almost all the children for whom Birahima provides an oration are school drop-outs. Sekou the Terrible quit school for want of money to pay his school fees; Johnny Thunderbolt quit school because of violence he received and committed at school; and Siponni the Viper quit school after only three years of attendance, then decided to become a fighter because he feared abuse at home if he returned there.<sup>93</sup>

Not even the children are oblivious to the value of education for their actual development or as a sign thereof. Birahima is cognizant of the dangers of inadequate education:

[G]oing to primary school for three years doesn’t make you all autonomous and incredible. You know a bit, but not enough; you end up being what Black Nigger African Natives called grilled on both sides. You’re not an indigenous savage any more like the rest of the Black Nigger African natives ‘cos you can understand the civilized blacks and the toubabs (. . . a white person) and work out what they are saying.<sup>94</sup>

At the end of his narrative, Birahima’s most prized possessions are four dictionaries he inherits from a Malinké who served as interpreter at the UNHCR (High Commissioner for Refugees).

Unlike Birahima, Johnny believes he is an intellectual: ‘I myself was already a bit of an intellectual . . . I had completed fourth grade, after all . . .’<sup>95</sup> In the course of the war, he collects books for his future library, one of which, a bible, is used by Laokolé to kill him. A tragic irony of sorts. We are not sure if Johnny intends the collection merely for display, or for his actual edification once the war is over. As for Ishmael, the chance to return to school after the long hiatus brings him great joy: ‘I had forgotten what it felt

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid.: 172.

<sup>92</sup> Kourouma 2006: 1–2.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.: 110, 178–9 and 196–7.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.: 2.

<sup>95</sup> Dongala 2005: 88.

like to be a student, to sit in class, to take notes, do homework, make friends, and provoke other students.<sup>96</sup>

#### 4.4 The Power to Be and to Have

In addition to the loss of family and the inability to stay in school, the lure of power, control, access to basic resources, as well as a sense of one's personal worth can also serve as powerful motivations to join armed conflict. When Yacouba tells Birahima that in Liberia street kids like him can become 'small-soldiers' and, with guns, can get everything they want, including 'American dollars . . . shoes and stripes and radios and helmets and even cars that they call four-by-fours', Birahima shouts 'Walahé! Walahé! I want to go to Liberia.'<sup>97</sup> Johnny reveals, in his characteristic crude fashion, the reasons he and his friends are fighting: 'To line our pockets. To become adults. To have all the women we wanted. To wield the power of a gun. To be the rulers of the world.'<sup>98</sup> In addition to helping him avenge his family, the gun allows Ishmael to be somebody:

I stood there holding my gun and felt special because I was part of something that took me seriously and I was not running from anyone anymore. I had my gun now . . . your source of power in these times. It will protect you and provide you all you need, if you know how to use it well.<sup>99</sup>

In the absence of any viable alternatives, it is hard to fault the boys for gravitating towards these immediate and tangible 'benefits' of war.

## 5. OF VICTIMS AND FREE AGENTS

'When the ocean tide recedes from a beach, fish are often left stranded. Torn from their natural environment, exposed to the sun and the wind, they thrash desperately on the sand as they die.'<sup>100</sup> Laokolé is speaking here of the horde of humanity trying to escape attacks by militia forces (they are in front of the closed gates of foreign embassies), yet it is a useful metaphor for understanding the status of children in times of conflict. As juvenile fish to the tides are children to grown-ups; they use them as pawns in their politics. As Ishmael puts it, 'We had not only lost our childhood in the war but our lives had been tainted by the same experiences that still caused us great pain and sadness.'<sup>101</sup> All children in war, be they willing perpetrators of atrocities or casualties of them, are victims. Yet, as we hinted earlier in this chapter, the question as to why children become combatants assumes a certain degree of agency on the part of some of them. Indeed, we know for sure that, unlike Ishmael who has to be forced to carry arms (though he ends up enamoured of them), both Birahima and Johnny willingly join their respective ragtag armies.

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<sup>96</sup> Beah 2007: 202.

<sup>97</sup> Kourouma 2006: 37.

<sup>98</sup> Dongala 2005: 64.

<sup>99</sup> Beah 2007: 124.

<sup>100</sup> Dongala 2005: 104.

<sup>101</sup> Beah 2007: 202.

Birahima refuses to deliver funeral orations for three child soldiers in his group. He tells us why: ‘they were more like the devil’s children than the Good Lord’s. All three of them were bastards, druggies, criminals, liars. They were cursed. I don’t want to say a funeral oration for the damned.’<sup>102</sup> And talking about what he calls his ‘fucked-up life’,<sup>103</sup> he cautions the reader:

Don’t go thinking I’m some cute kid, ’cos I’m not. I’m cursed because I did bad things to my maman . . . I’m not some cute kid on account of how I’m hunted by the *gnamas* of lots of people . . . And I killed lots of innocent victims over in Liberia and Sierra Leone where I was a child doing tribal warfare, and where I got fucked-up on lots of drugs. The *gnamas* of the innocent people I killed are stalking me, so my whole life and everything round me is fucked. *Gnamokodé*.<sup>104</sup>

What are we to make of this harsh judgement by Birahima of his fellow child soldiers and of himself? Why are the other children deserving of funeral orations, but not these three, though it is easy to see that all child soldiers are more or less ‘bastards, druggies, criminals, liars?’ How much weight should we give to the self-judgment of a pre-teen who, clearly, has not had the benefit of a strong moral education? Or maybe, the question to ask is: how did these particular children become bastards, druggies, criminals and liars? Was it a conscious choice on their part? How much free will do Birahima and other children have, and how much latitude do they have to exercise it? Moreover, should they be held accountable for actions committed under adult supervision and instigation? Is one’s victimization an excuse to victimize others?

The victim-perpetrator question has become a particularly thorny one, especially given the current ICC trial of Dominic Ongwen for crimes of war and against humanity.<sup>105</sup> Abducted at around nine, Ongwen grew up to be a ruthlessly efficient fighter who became one of the loyal strategists and brigade commanders in Joseph Kony’s now nearly defunct Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA). The debate concerns the extent to which, if any, Ongwen should be held accountable for the atrocities he committed while a member of the LRA. In a more general sense, where do we set the threshold for culpability and innocence? Does the argument for moral exoneration become weaker the further up the adulthood ladder one moves? In other words, Ongwen would argue that because, to his mind, there is no temporal rupture between his capture and conscription and his arrest and arraignment, he should not be held responsible for the things he did in the interim. In an interview given just before leaving for The Hague, he reasoned thus: ‘I was captured at a tender age, and went there as someone who was blind and deaf. It is the same way in which I returned.’<sup>106</sup> If we can, how do we assign moral responsibility? Did Dominic Ongwen know at the time of his abduction that something wrong was being done to him? If so (which is more than likely), did he completely forget this as he grew up into adulthood and his new role? Did Ongwen take any decision between the age of 18 and the time he was

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<sup>102</sup> Kourouma 2006: 144.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*: 3.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*: 4.

<sup>105</sup> Ongwen is the ‘first known person to be charged with the same war crimes of which he is also victim’. Baines 2008: 1. For a detailed review of the Ongwen case, see Ramos in this volume.

<sup>106</sup> Akena 2015.

arrested that demonstrated moral complexity? Erin Baines, in her field notes on Dominic Ongwen, observes that ‘Ongwen grew up in one of the most brutal environments known to humanity, with little room for moral development that would enable him to later take decisions independent of the LRA.’<sup>107</sup> By saying that Ongwen had ‘little room for moral development’, as opposed to zero room, Baines allows us to see Ongwen as a ‘complex political victim’.<sup>108</sup> Not being entirely bereft of conscience and agency, Ongwen could not have been a mere marionette in the hands of his LRA superiors. Indeed, Ongwen, it has been said, could be kind and merciful to his subordinates and victims. ‘Reflecting on messages about amnesty’<sup>109</sup> and his eventual defection from the LRA reveal a capacity on his part to understand the irrationality, unreliability and wickedness of Joseph Kony.<sup>110</sup> While his capture by LRA forces ‘may indeed have been a matter of bad luck’ for little Dominic,<sup>111</sup> it could not have been a matter of simple luck that he rose faster than most of his colleagues within the LRA ranks to become brigade commander in his late 20s.<sup>112</sup> Ongwen certainly knew that by being hardworking, efficient and loyal, he would do more than just survive. Acknowledging that the ‘environmental factors to which Ongwen was exposed’ may have played a part in what he became, Matthew Talbert and Jessica Wolfendale caution against heading down a slippery slope: ‘[I]f we start down the road of excusing perpetrators because their moral vision is impaired and because they have been shaped by factors beyond their control, we may not find an obvious place to stop.’<sup>113</sup> Is it possible then to punish Ongwen appropriately for his cruel deeds while taking into account the cruelty he himself suffered? How could this be accomplished within the framework of the criminal justice system?

Mark Drumbl makes the case that criminal law, which sees things in binary absolutes – ‘guilty or not-guilty, persecuted or persecutor, abused or abuser, right or wrong, powerful or powerless’ – can benefit significantly from ‘literary accounts’ which tend to ‘unpack the subtleties of and contiguities among victims and perpetrators, including betrayals, loyalties, connivances and acts of resistance’.<sup>114</sup> Cautioning against dichotomous thinking, Nikki Bado-Fralick notes:

In dichotomous thinking, light and dark function as absolutes, very much like the on/off light switch we’re familiar with in our homes. In absolute darkness, we are blind. In absolute light, we are also blind. If sight is the point, neither absolute darkness nor absolute light gives us what we want. It is only through the dynamic play of light and dark – the shifting of lights and shadows – that sight exists.<sup>115</sup>

To be sure, if justice is the goal in cases such as Ongwen’s, Drumbl’s idea that ‘the performance of international courts and tribunals could be tweaked to transcend reductionism

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<sup>107</sup> Baines 2008: 2.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*: 4.

<sup>109</sup> Akena 2015.

<sup>110</sup> A fact that is at least partly revealed in ‘Dominic Ongwen Reveals Why He Left Joseph Kony’. NTV Uganda 2015.

<sup>111</sup> Drumbl 2016: 236–7.

<sup>112</sup> Chothia 2015.

<sup>113</sup> Talbert and Wolfendale 2018.

<sup>114</sup> Drumbl 2016: 218.

<sup>115</sup> Bado-Fralick 2005: 6.

and deliver a richer narrative'<sup>116</sup> makes a lot of sense. Fortunately, the potential for this is already present in the performance of courts. In presenting the prosecution's case against Dominic Ongwen, the ICC chief prosecutor argues that because 'each human being must be considered to be endowed with moral responsibility for their actions', Dominic Ongwen bears responsibility for 'crimes committed as an adult . . . the choice to embrace the murderous violence used by the LRA and to make it the hallmark of operations carried out by his soldiers'. Nonetheless, prosecutor Fatou Bensouda concedes the grey zones in Ongwen's biography:

One aspect of this case is the fact that not only is Ongwen alleged to be the perpetrator of these crimes, he was also a victim. He . . . was abducted from his home by an earlier generation of LRA fighters . . . He . . . must have gone through the trauma of separation from his family, brutalisation by his captors and initiation into the violence of the LRA way of life.<sup>117</sup>

So while it is true that 'law fails to authenticate' multidimensional stories, law does not always have the capacity to exclude or silence them entirely. After all, those robed individuals and jurors who dispense sentences and punishment are humans, and as such, are prone to flexing their moral and empathic muscles in spite of what Drumbl calls criminal law's 'angularity'.<sup>118</sup> In Ongwen's case, prosecutor Bensouda concedes that the fact that Ongwen himself was victimized 'may perhaps amount to some mitigation of sentence in the event that he is convicted of these crimes'.<sup>119</sup>

The situation of the decommissioned child soldier is less complicated. Still, the case of a child soldier like Ishmael Beah could throw light on Ongwen's situation, especially given the difference between Ongwen (a grown man who refuses to assume responsibility for his crimes)<sup>120</sup> and Ishmael Beah (a teenager who acknowledges his blemished past). After his removal from the front,<sup>121</sup> Ishmael is mad at any adult who tells him 'it is not your fault'.<sup>122</sup> He hates the phrase because he knows what he has done is unforgettable and inexcusable. Talking about the war prisoners they tied to trees and executed, Ishmael underscores the impossibility of erasing evidence of one's past: 'Their blood stained the trees and never washed off, even during the rainy season.'<sup>123</sup> It is not until he meets Nurse Esther that his point of view shifts:

It was the genuine tone in Esther's voice that made the phrase finally begin to sink into my mind and heart. That didn't make me immune from the guilt that I felt for what I had done. Nonetheless, it lightened my burdensome memories and gave me strength to think about things.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Drumbl 2016: 243.

<sup>117</sup> ICC 2016.

<sup>118</sup> Drumbl 2016: 243.

<sup>119</sup> ICC 2016.

<sup>120</sup> Ongwen has pleaded not guilty to all charges against him.

<sup>121</sup> Chosen by Lieutenant Jabati as a candidate for rehabilitation and released to the UNHCR, Ishmael left the front in January 1996. He completed eight months of rehabilitation in Freetown, mostly at The Benin Home Rehabilitation Center, before he was handed over to his uncle.

<sup>122</sup> Beah 2007: 160.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*: 190.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*: 165.

Ishmael knows that he cannot be held criminally culpable for his actions. However, by showing remorse for them, he acknowledges he is not 100 per cent innocent. The same is true of the fictional Birahima who never stops blaming himself for his mother's death and for the terrible things he did to his war victims.

## 6. ADAPTABILITY, MEMORY AND RESILIENCE

To survive in a new environment, children (like adults) are required to adapt, in one fashion or another, to their new reality. The Kapo trials, for example, expose the extent to which people can go to stay alive.<sup>125</sup>

Birahima tells us that '[t]he first time I smoked hash, I puked like a sick dog, but after a while I got used to it and soon it made me strong as a grown-up'.<sup>126</sup> The ability to normalize new realities, or become desensitized to their effects, constitutes a form of adaptability. Laokolé makes this salient observation on more than one occasion:

The brain is an extraordinary organ. After an hour of fear and dread under the bombardment, mine adapted to the situation. It transformed the whistlings, shock waves, and explosions into routine sounds that were nothing more than familiar background noise. My terror faded and my body relaxed.<sup>127</sup>

The need for survival not only allows one to be chameleon-like, to be one with one's surroundings, as in the examples with Birahima and Laokolé above; it can also enable one to display abilities that one didn't know one had, or that one will never see again after the need has been satisfied. This is the case of Ishmael. Ishmael did not know how to climb coconut trees, until one day, hungry and thirsty, the only food available is coconuts. He finds himself at the summit of a coconut tree before he realizes what he is doing: 'It is difficult to explain how it happened, but I mounted the coconut tree quite fast and unexpectedly. By the time I realized what I was doing and thought about my experience in this particular art, I was already at the top of the branches and plucking coconuts.'<sup>128</sup> Ishmael tried climbing other coconut trees after that; he could not.

If children are able to adapt to a new environment, they are equally able to resist its stranglehold on them. This is resilience, the capacity to remain essentially oneself in adversity, or to spring back from it. More specifically, the ability to recover partially, if not fully, one's childhood.

In the *Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Du Bois develops the notion of double consciousness in relation to blacks in America: 'One ever feels his two-ness,— an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.'<sup>129</sup> Resilience, indeed, is why blacks survived slavery in America, even though the struggle to be accepted as fully American continues. The 'two-ness' of the Black man is similar to the oxymoron of the

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<sup>125</sup> See Drumbl 2016.

<sup>126</sup> Kourouma 2006: 71.

<sup>127</sup> Dongala 2005: 218.

<sup>128</sup> Beah 2007: 47.

<sup>129</sup> Du Bois 2007: 3.

child soldier. However, whereas Du Bois' subject 'simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows',<sup>130</sup> the children of war forced to be adults do not necessarily actively seek to be both child and adult at the same time. In fact, they routinely lament the loss of their childhood even as they acknowledge (sometimes embrace) the impossibility of fully returning to that prelapsarian state.

The reader encounters two powerful images of resilience in *Johnny Mad Dog*. The first is offered by Johnny. During a conversation he had with his grandfather and the latter's wife, Johnny learnt about a special tree: 'A mougheté was a fire resistant tree. It was the proud, solitary form you saw on the savannah after all the vegetation had been destroyed by a brush fire.'<sup>131</sup> During one of the darkest moments in her life, shortly after losing her mother and her mother's best friend in a series of bombardments, Laokolé finds pride and solace in a structure that she had helped her mason father build. 'My gaze fell upon the wall surrounding Mr. Ibara's house. A rocket had blown an enormous hole in the middle of it, but despite this damage it was still standing . . . this wall that had defied the bombs.'<sup>132</sup> Here they are, two structures, one made by nature, the other by humans, preserving their integrity in the midst of adversity. Yet, we are reminded by the rocket hole in the standing wall that while recovery is possible, total recovery is not. The child, like a palimpsest of Mr Ibara's wall, will show felt and/or visible traces of past trauma.

Ishmael also uses nature to talk indirectly about his potential for recovery and redemption:

One night . . . I looked into the sky and saw how the thick clouds kept trying to cover the moon, yet it would reappear again and again to shine all night long. In some way, my journey was like the moon – although I had even more thick clouds coming my way to make my spirit dull.<sup>133</sup>

Throughout Ishmael's journey, the moon appears quite frequently (as it does also in Laokolé's) as a reminder of what he should not forget, his relatively happy childhood. Save for a significant portion of the time when the constant fighting and consumption of drugs left him no time to think about his previous life, happy memories of his childhood (with family and friends, at home and at school) have resurfaced to help him deal with the trauma of war.

Whereas adaptability could be an end in itself, that is, a point of no return (which seems to be so in Johnny's case), resilience is a necessary condition of rehabilitation (as is clearly the case with Ishmael, and somewhat with Birahima, both rescued from war). Resilience, like the *sankofa*,<sup>134</sup> is at once backward-looking and forward-projecting; it drags along from the rubble of the past the very soul of the future. The foundation of resilience is memory. Without memory, one can never be resilient enough to make it

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Dongala 2005: 236.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.: 244.

<sup>133</sup> Beah 2007: 69–70.

<sup>134</sup> *Sankofa* is an Akan (Ghanaian) expression meaning it is not forbidden to go back and fetch what you forgot. The concept, often symbolized in a mythic bird whose feet face resolutely forward while the head faces backwards, represents the necessity and willingness to go back to the past for the sake of the future. See University of Illinois Springfield 2018.

successfully into the future. For those with childhood memories that are better forgotten, the task of rehabilitation becomes that much harder. Of the three child soldiers, Ishmael is the one who stands the greatest chance of succeeding in the future. Birahima refuses to think about his pre-war past for, honestly, given ‘the scar, on my arm, in my head, in my belly . . . and in my heart’ and ‘maman’s nauseating smell’,<sup>135</sup> there are no good memories from it. Instead, he wishes he could remember how life was before his mother started suffering and before he was born (‘it is a pity we don’t know how the world was before we get born’), a time when his mother ‘was a young virgin before her excision . . . pretty as a gazelle, pretty as a *gouro* mask’.<sup>136</sup> Like Birahima, Johnny hardly talks about his past; which makes the reader suspect there is nothing in the boy’s life to fall back on. On the contrary, Ishmael has more pleasant memories than unpleasant ones from his time before the war. Even though his parents were separated, and his father’s subsequent wives showed him and his brothers hostility,<sup>137</sup> he received genuine love from both parents and from his grandmother. ‘Whenever I get a chance to observe the moon now, I will see those same images . . . I saw when I was six, and it pleases me to know that part of my childhood is still embedded in me.’<sup>138</sup>

## 7. CONCLUSION

The child soldier sits at the crossroads of childhood (theoretical or lived) and adulthood, often without wishing to be there. It is a dangerous place to be. Depending on the force of the wind and the way it is blowing, the child will live fully again or be damaged forever. As Ishmael reminds us, ‘children have the resilience to outlive their sufferings, if given the chance’.<sup>139</sup> One of the best concrete examples of this, beyond Ishmael’s true and exemplary story of rehabilitation, is what Laokolé does with the children at the UN compound where thousands of refugees are held until abandoned by the international community: thanks to her efforts,

[t]he kids had forgotten the dreary camp in which they were stagnating. They had become children once more, doing what nobody in the world does better: playing. With their hands and boundless imaginations, they built houses and trucks out of bits of bamboo; from empty sardine tins mounted on beer corks, they made cars that they raced in the sand; out of scraps of iron, they fashioned airplanes; using empty tin cans and pieces of plastic, they erected structures I couldn’t even name. No sooner had their brains thought of an object than their nimble fingers would set about making it, their creativity finding abundant raw materials in the piles of trash that lay all over the camp . . .<sup>140</sup>

Phoenix-like, children are the ones most able to make a heaven of hell, after grown-ups have done the opposite. This image is not very different from the one that ends *Johnny Mad*

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<sup>135</sup> Kourouma 2006: 7.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*: 11.

<sup>137</sup> Beah 2007: 10.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*: 17.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*: 169.

<sup>140</sup> Dongala 2005: 298.

*Dog*. The reader may have hoped that Laokolé would get out of the Congo mess and head to America.<sup>141</sup> That would have been a very happy conclusion indeed. Nonetheless, the actual ending of the story, that sees the 16-year-old Laokolé adopting a little orphan girl and moving resolutely into the future, without any thoughts of fleeing her country, is quite satisfying. In the end, we see two traumatized children – one now fully grown and already a mother at 16, the other on Laokolé’s back, freshly named ‘Joy’ – step into the night, guided by their faith in themselves, the future and the ‘brilliant diamonds’ in the sky.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> An American aid worker offers to help Lao get to America to continue her education.

<sup>142</sup> Dongala 2005: 321.

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