

Concepts of children and childhood in anthropology and in a tribal community of middle India¹

Ho children and fieldwork

In my long-term fieldwork among the Ho, a tribal community in central eastern India, children were my best teachers many times - their acquired competence of socially interacting self - confidently within their Ho universe and their patience with the ignorant anthropologist were simply amazing. Often, when grown - up Ho interlocutors gave up because they had more urgent things to do, Ho children continued to spend their time with me. They taught me Ho, their mother tongue, made me repeat words time and again until they were satisfied with my pronunciation, often motivating me with a big sigh of relief when I got it right - just as the adults did. They shared fruits with me that they had plucked from high up in the tree tops. Often they would take care of their younger 'siblings' by carrying them on their hips. They took me to the jungle where they knew their way around as if it was a second home to them. They would inform me when rituals were taking place somewhere, and they would take me along if they happened to be among the protagonists of these performances. They would run off, though, if there were duties waiting for them such as herding the cows which implied chasing them, beating them, calming them down, thus educating them. They demonstrated that they had the upper hand even in risky situations when the cows turned wild. Often they would be busy for a full day.

[Ho] Children are "not only important, in and of themselves, they are interesting"², and they can be so funny. The encounter with Ho children as knowing subjects has certainly been rewarding in every sense, but, of course, there is more to it than a personal, coincidental, and emotional experience. Since they are firmly entrenched in their Ho culture the encounter has also

¹ This is the title of a lecture held at the 2012 Inter-Congress of the IUAES Commission on Children, Childhood and Youth which took place in Bhubaneswar, India from November 26 - 30. The following paper is a revised and slightly enlarged version of that lecture.

² Margaret Trawick in her Position Paper for the 2012 Inter-Congress.

been revealing from an anthropological perspective. It has inspired this paper on children and childhood.

What follows is a selective and general introduction into relevant concepts of children and childhood as they are presently debated in the field of anthropology and beyond, complemented by ethnographic illustrations from recent fieldwork among the Ho in Orissa and Jharkhand, India.

Concepts of children and childhood in anthropology

By now there is quite an impressive, though highly contested body of anthropological literature on childhood offering a wide range of cultural understandings and cross-cultural evidence from a variety of very different societies³. However, as yet amazingly little has been published to throw light from a social and cultural anthropological perspective on the concept(s) of children in India⁴ and even less of the tribal children of India - beyond educational, nutritional, and medicinal aspects of child care, the context - free collecting and presenting of 'data' and the 'objective' world of statistics.

While there is no denying that young Ho persons and children growing up in 'western culture areas' equally constitute *Anthropos*, I intend to show that there is an encompassing socio-cultural dimension to account for significant differences in interactional patterns and children's agencies. I will argue that children's aspirations and behaviour in a Durkheimian sense are impacted by the surrounding societal values and norms. How children are raised, how children are expected or tolerated to behave and behave 'back', what status, social role and place they are assigned in their community and at what age, and what their futures hold for them is interrelated to how childhood is conceptualized in their respective societies.

Geertz, Sahlins and the controversy on child development

Clifford Geertz once remarked, "We have the equipment to live a thousand different lives, although we end up living only one"⁵. In analogy this should also be true for children who have the equipment to live a thousand

³To give a few examples: Montgomery 2009; Lancy 2008, 2012; Bluebond-Langner/Korbin 2007; Hirschfeld 1999, 2002; LeVine 2007; Whiting 1963, 1988; James 2007; Benthall 1992.

⁴The monograph by Seymour 1999 is a remarkable exception.

⁵Quoted in Sahlins, Marshall (2008: 107).

different childhoods although they, too, may end up living only one. Marshall Sahlins refers to the above statement by Clifford Geertz in a pamphlet advertising its position in the title "The Western Illusion of Human Nature" and continues that "this is only possible on the condition that biological needs and drives do not specify the particular means and forms of their realization. Biology becomes a determined determinant" (Sahlins 2008: 107)⁶. This a brief and blunt counter position to much (western) contemporary writing on the anthropology of childhood that is at times strongly informed by genetic determinism, primatology, evolutionary anthropology, or psychology. In the course of my fieldwork among the Ho, I, too, found how limiting and limited legally, biologically, or psychologically based notions of children and childhood may prove when it comes to understanding complex cultural situations of which children form a constitutive part. The analysis of my childhood - related fieldwork data in the final part of this paper will rather reveal the social nature of constructing a Ho child's personhood within the context of Ho society. I also question the usefulness in anthropology of operating with a singular category of childhood characterized by linear processes of developmental progression and, moreover, with notionally distinct domains such as childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. For these reasons I sympathize with Sahlins's position, and I'll come back to his argument later.

Geertz's initial statement about humans' 'equipment' invites a number of questions. Who or what accounts for diverse trajectories in a human's, in a child's development? Are differences in the concepts of the categories of 'child' and 'childhood' of a principled, qualitative nature and how are these related to those diverse trajectories? Who or what are the determining determinants? Where and how does *social and cultural* anthropology enter the scene and with what perspectives? Indeed, within contemporary mainstream discourses all of these questions are being raised and controversially dealt with to the extent that concepts of childhood and what it means to be a child have become an emotive, multi-faceted subject matter and a hotly debated issue, also in a number of other disciplines, also often politically charged.

⁶ *ibid.*

Anthropology and debates about the 'universal' child

Dominant Western discourses of 'normal' child development are quite frequently and centrally based on developmental psychology (Montgomery 2009: 3)⁷ with its unshaken claim of presenting universal facts about a supposed universal progression from childhood as a state of immaturity to adulthood as a state of being more complete and representing the norm. Ethnographically informed research literature on childhood, however, has confronted such generalizing assumptions ever since the 20th century, and continues to do so. Also, the applicability outside the West of standardized legal definitions of a child as any human being below the age of eighteen as reflected in the United Nations' Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)⁸, its organic needs, its best interests, and its rights as a citizen is at stake. Not only within the context of human rights discourses it is D. Lancy who warns not only against the wholesale exportation of ethnocentric definitions, but also against the ethnocentric lens of a "wholesale exportation of culture - specific child-rearing practices" (quoted in Bluebond-Langner/ Korbin 2007: 244) following from this. So what and how, actually, should we study and examine, portray and represent, when we are doing research on children and childhood from an *anthropological* perspective or, more precisely, on culturally constructed concepts of children and childhood rather than biologically informed specific stages of life as static givens?

An anthropology of childhood will have to take into consideration that the very category of childhood has been claimed to be a recent invention in the West and a modern idea. Montgomery argues that the concept of

⁷ Montgomery points out the emphasis on psychology in American anthropology going back to the days of Franz Boas under whose aegis the Culture and Personality School was inaugurated, and LeVine 2007 remarks that to his knowledge Boas's assessment of this branch within anthropology has nowhere been documented. Montgomery further argues that British social anthropology, on the other hand, has always been suspicious of this focus on psychology as a determining factor and the perspective resulting from this within anthropology.

⁸⁸ This convention is also criticized within the West beyond anthropological discourses. It should be mentioned that the United States have signed, however not ratified this convention for a number of different reasons. One reason is that the convention legally binds the state to regularly check or control what is going on within the American family, another one is that the Convention's non-violence approach would disallow children's access to guns and rifles before the age of 18.

adolescence has been travelling around a globalized world only since its 'discovery' in the 20th century (Montgomery 2009:13, 15, 51). Such essentializing claims continue to be travelling to this day, sometimes supported by highly specialized discourses⁹. An anthropology of childhood would also have to account for those contemporary scholars who argue from a somewhat reverse anthropological point of view. They envisage children's *agency* as a dominant and unrelated factor to constitute a child-centred anthropology thereby recognizing children as active informants, authentic voices and meaning-makers living in their own meaningful and autonomous culture, producing their own culture and shaping that of their peers as well as that of the adults (Hirschfeld 1999, Trawick 2007). On the other hand this approach "to promote children's agency as a cornerstone of research" (Lancy 2012) is sharply criticized by some as harmful to a scientific approach to the study of childhood. It marginalizes, the argument runs, anthropology because "it focuses attention on the traditional targets of psychology (the individual's mental state) and sociology (social position)" (ibid.) and denies the impact of a child's embeddedness within the tapestry of the surrounding culture. Lancy strongly emphasized this criticism in his key note at the IUAES congress in November 2012.

Indeed, some have only lately deplored the neglect of an empirically grounded anthropology of childhood due to anthropologists' hypothesized aversion to and professional ignorance of children (Hirschfeld 2002). At the same time others have begun to write out its very history (LeVine 2007, Montgomery 2009) and praise "the trove of scholarship" (Lancy 2012) that already exists. Referring to B. Malinowski, M. Mead, and R. Firth as pioneers - others even go back further to Boas 1901 (Lancy 2012) or Spencer 1899 (Benthall 1992) - they claim there has been a well - established tradition ever since the 1920ies that was also critical of universal developmental markers as formulated in psychology and biology about *the* child. In fact, Margaret Mead's

⁹ In a renowned national German journal for physicians, *Deutsches Ärzteblatt* (June 2013: 423), e.g., adolescence is the topical subject matter. It is presented from a neuroscientific perspective as an intrapersonal "developmental period" between the age of twelve to 24. In relation to a person's brain development and other somatic changes the focus includes psychological and legal consequences in terms of a youth's (age of) criminal responsibility, heightened risk behaviours, and emotional disorders.

ethnographic reasoning contradicted the then mainstream assumptions by G.S. Hall of adolescence (1904) as a specific biologically informed stage in a person's life universally characterized by turmoil. They point to an already existing rich literature grounded in ethnographic fieldwork in diverse cultures and often discussing childhood in the context of kinship and ritual thus underpinning the unity of adult and child social spheres (LeVine 2007: 250, Benthall 1992: 1) and focussing on socio-cultural aspects rather than a child's determining innate dispositions. It is exactly this line of argument that I will focus on and return to in my ethnographic examples later.

The debate is on - within anthropology as well as within the interdisciplinary field of childhood studies. Issues, methods, and perspectives on how to study children and childhood continue to be negotiated between the poles of 'childhood is about health, vitality, and growth in order to produce a robust animal' (E. Charnov 2001) and 'childhood is about 'culture acquisition' (E. Sapir 1993). Contemporary anthropological discourse has to come to grips with how to envisage children within a given society and cross-culturally. Do we conceive of them as innocent¹⁰, weak, fragile, dependent, incomplete, immature, naturally good if presocial, and vulnerable? Are they "cute cherubs, preternatural angelic beings" (Lancy 2008), individual isolates growing up in a *child-centred* neontocracy as opposed to those that are attributed social competence and maturity in varying degrees, reliability, trusted to assume responsibilities, growing up and into what has been called a *child-supported society* (ibid.: 11)?

To preliminarily sum up: assuming that generalizing views of *the* universal child are "antithetical to most anthropological thinking" (Bluebond-Langner and Korbin 2007: 244), anthropologists have resisted universal and essentializing definitions of children and of childhood as a matter of principle to this day. "There are no separate or autonomous categories of adult or child" (Montgomery 2009: 55), there is no domain of childhood that is notionally separate from a domain of adulthood the divide between both being complex,

¹⁰ Seeing children as innocent is a view that Montgomery claims to be culture-specific in the West. Moreover, she argues that the reifying concept of the innocent child can be "extremely dangerous to children" (2009: 236) in the case that children act as child soldiers, e.g., thus turning out to be aggressors rather than aggressed.

permeable, and culture-specific. However, how childhood is *conceptualized* has a direct impact on what 'equipment' they are believed to dispose of. Conceptualizations are cultural constructs: the innocent child, e.g., is one such cultural construct among many others; another contrasting one, e.g., is understanding infants as being ensouled by their dead kinsmen and having their "skills, knowledge, temperament and attributes" (Sahlins 2008: 100). The point I want to make is, "There is nothing *natural* in how children grow up" (Montgomery 2009: 236; my emphasis).

Human Nature, Children's Nature, and Personhood

This brings me back to the statement by Clifford Geertz which I quoted at the outset of this paper. Marshall Sahlins has embedded it in his reflexions on Western and comparative notes on other conceptions of Human Nature - implying other cultural constructions of a child's 'nature'. Both Geertz and Sahlins have been largely ignored in most of the latest publications on childhood although in my view they offer some seminal insights into a child developing personhood - 'at home' and elsewhere, and also in Ho society. A similar neglect is true of Marilyn Strathern who finds highly sensitive and differentiating formulations concerning a child's social maturing processes in Melanesia.¹¹ In his essay Sahlins addresses Christianity and the Christian belief in the concept of Original Sin resulting in the assumption of Man as basically evil or inherently egoistic. In fact, Sahlins develops in much detail, how the contemporary Western conceptualization of the individual, of human nature, of how a child and its needs is envisaged, has been informed over centuries by Christianity, by ancient philosophies, and, nowadays, by modern sciences. These assumptions have become materialized in the individualizing ideology prevailing in the West of the "selfish gene" (R. Dawkins 1989)¹², or what Sahlins labels the issue of 'biologism', i.e. the supremacy of the genetic imperatives ascribed to be operative, dominant and characteristic of human nature and also an infant's development. The cultural consequence resulting

¹¹ Montgomery, however, does draw from Strathern 1988 when discussing the Melanesian concept of the multiple person.

¹² "He argued that, in fact, living organisms are just the means by which genes replicate" (Lancy 2008: 8, 9 on R. Dawkins).

from this, he argues, is the narrowed conceptualization of a child's growth in the organic terms of its bodily achievements, desires, deficiencies, and needs.

Round the planet, in non - western societies, however, "the more common belief is simply that the infant is not yet a full person (Sahlins 2008: 101). Children are treated as 'humanity - in - becoming' or on their way from imperfect to perfected humanity. Children are 'trained' into recognizing social obligations, and they are credited the confidence, sometimes at quite an early age as we would think in the West, in their capacity to perform social duties, and to perform them well. They are conceived to be born human whether incompletely so or fully so in the case of incarnation, but not from some pre-social state and not as an anti-person with inherent either agreeable or disagreeable dispositions. An infant in Hagen, Strathern remarks, is less trained than nurtured to personhood and certainly not considered wild or innately anti-social. A child's maturation is addressed towards developing the mental capacity of assuming social relationships or, in Strathern's words, the Hagen child grows into social maturity, becomes socially competent "through appreciation of what social relationships with others involve" (Strathern 1988). Sociality is conceived of as the normal human condition, Sahlins argues with reference to topical ethnographic evidence and with reference to contemporary anthropologists who also stress cultural and social aspects as the determining determinants in a child's development. Biological markers are neither denied nor ignored. But as they are always symbolically defined, they are expressions of cultural order and not of some 'irresistible', objectively existing, innate inclinations defined as universal human nature existing unrelated from the world around. Anthropology is about the social and cultural significance given to these inherent dispositions in culture-specific contexts. Children's maturing then may eventually turn out to be an issue of

"their progression of mind and soul rather than the regulation of bodily impulses. Personhood is gradually achieved through social interactions, especially those involving reciprocity and interdependence, for these comprise and teach the child's social identities" (Sahlins 2008: 101).

I have shown in the representation of the anthropological debate that childhood is so much more than a set, separate, vulnerable, and

physiologically determined fixed stage in a person's life, an intrapersonal affair, as it were. It is also so much more than a space inhabited by rights-bearing citizens protected by much national and international legislation. In the next paragraph I will illustrate how the Ho's alternative conceptualizations of children and childhood contribute to initiating mutual relationships, categories of behaviour, and, more generally, child - oriented practices.

Children and Childhood in a tribal community of middle India

The following two ethnographic examples have been chosen from recent fieldwork among the Ho, a tribal community of roughly a million people living mainly in the hilly areas of the states of Jharkhand and Orissa.

Example 1: The anthropologist as child

For the sake of participant observation I had found a 'family' who accepted me as a classificatory member, addressed me by kinship terms, and taught me to reciprocally do the same. I had made it very clear that I was a novice, as concerned Ho culture and that I wanted to learn everything that I was trusted to learn from somebody competent to teach me. So I was afforded by my classificatory younger brother (*undin*) with his *kaki*, a term for the categories of a father's younger brother's wife or a mother's younger sister, who that way became my *kaki* and who in turn addressed me as 'young girl' (*mai*). *Mai* is an address term, but not a specific kinship term.¹³ It is a category related to those whose task it conventionally is to help and do necessary daily chores in someone's household, also in somebody else's. In the course of my stay it turned out that my *kaki* conceived of herself as my mother, however, she did not address me as *beti* or *kui-hon* (see footnote below). I had a mother, but I was not 'quite' her daughter in the sense of being her *kui-hon*. Obviously there were different shades of being a child, a girl, or a daughter! It took me some time to establish a pedigree from the bits and pieces that were passed on to me in order to trace the relation between her, my younger brother, who was the village eldest (*munda*) in the

¹³ In my area of fieldwork people more often used the Hindi equivalent *beti* or the Ho term *kui-hon* to address a/ their daughter. Also Deeney 2005 does not list *mai* as a kinship term. Bouez 1985, however, relates to *mai* as 'younger sister' and 'daughter' with both the Ho and Santal (1985: 202) and characterizes the relation between *ma/ kaki* and *mai* as 'legère hiérarchie' (ibid: 64).

neighbouring hamlet, and myself. Eventually it was confirmed that our *kaki* was 'our' FFBySW. This made social sense, because in terms of her and 'our' pedigree she was one generation ahead of me. However, it did not make sense biologically - which is the reason why I enlarge on this very situation here - because she was clearly so much younger than I was. Even when she learned that I was a grandmother to three grandchildren back home, she continued to address and treat me as 'young girl' or *mai*. I was surprised at this, but nobody else was. When after a few months she heard me make a phone call to my husband, she smiled and said: "*aratadi* - after all this time I am going to meet my son-in-law". This clearly identified me as her social, classificatory daughter in kinship terms, and I began to realize that in Ho country kinship was a process rather than a static given, a state of becoming rather than of being once and for all - perhaps. I also learnt that others to whom I was elder sister (*dai* or *ji*), looked forward to meeting my husband because that way they would acquire an elder sister's husband (*teya*), which is a joking relationship. My social identities, as I have argued above, further increased when I was constructed into my Santal assistant's mother, whose wife consequently turned into my daughter - in - law (*kimin*). Maybe I was socially maturing, slowly, slowly, and becoming more and more complete acquiring more joking as well as avoidance relationships and on my way to a "multiple person, made up through relationships with others", as Strathern has formulated?

So while by some, who were younger than I was, I was addressed as young girl, for others who were similarly younger, I was turned into a mother. The example should illustrate how inadequate our conventional Western dichotomy of childhood versus adulthood may prove when it comes to making cultural sense of a simple kinship situation elsewhere. Also, exclusive notions of being either a child or an adult in a biologically informed chronology of a person's life may become meaningless in a culture where childhood and adulthood are socially defined, where the boundaries between the two are known to be blurred and the domains as such are seen as complementary to rather than separate of each other. This is illustrated in more empirical detail in the second example.

Example 2: Unity of child and adult social sphere in ritual.

Mage Porob, a Ho village festival.

Mage Porob is a feast that is observed in every Ho village after the harvest work is done. It usually takes place in the course of January or February, and the whole village is involved in singing, dancing, drinking, and, most importantly, meeting kith and kin. In the process of fixing the very days of the feast the village priest (*diuri*) has the decisive say. A lot could be said about *Mage Porob* and its relevance within Ho ritual performances, but this is not the point why I mention it in the context of this article.

The case that I want to elaborate here will shed some light on the ritual importance of quite young boys which came to the fore in the course of preparing *Mage Porob* in Pathan Sai, the site of my fieldwork.

The present village priest had decided to step down for a number of reasons that I cannot enlarge upon within the scope of the present article, from an otherwise hereditary post. So, in order to fix a day for *Mage Porob*, a new *diuri* had to be elected first in the course of a ritual designed to serve exactly this very purpose. For the procedure itself about 60 to 70 male adult persons assembled each household of the village being represented that way. Eventually everybody sat down on the ground next to the sacred grove of the village (*desauli*), whereas a few people stepped inside the sacred grove such as the former village priests, two village elders (*mundas*) of two adjacent hamlets plus their helping hands. All were facing east when the ritual called *mad pata*: began.

Mad Pata:, the ritual to elect the village priest.

Mad is a generic term for bamboo, and in this case it became notionally important that *buru mad*, i.e. bamboo growing in the jungle, was cut. This was the former village priest's task which he performed after he had taken a ritual bath in a pond near-by. *Pata*: on the other hand carries the meaning "to entwine (e.g. two ropes, two branches), to interlace" (Deeney 2005: 284). The idea of the ritual is the following: the candidates willing to be elected as village priest needed to be suggested by any of the Ho villagers first and they needed to consent to standing as a candidate. The final say, however, was

with the Ho spirits and gods. It was up to them to decide who was going to become the village priest and who his helpers.

For this purpose two boys, perhaps eight or nine years old, functioned as the intermediaries to the divine sphere. They had taken a bath and were dressed in a clean loin cloth (*dhoti*). A dot of vermilion (*sindur*) and some rice grains were put into their palms by the *diuri* who was in charge of the ritual. They stood opposite each other, concentrated and calm, maybe three metres apart from each other, holding the bamboo branches that had been split into two halves, under their armpit, and throughout the ritual they did not move. When their positioning was considered correct, the *diuri* began chanting his mantras thereby demanding of the gods to show consent or dissent whenever he called out the name of a candidate. It was interpreted as a sign of divine consent when immediately after a name was called out the bamboo halves that the boys were holding began to entwine or come closer to each other, visibly and publicly. Indeed, this happened time and again. It was considered a sign of godly dissent on the other hand, if the split bamboo branches did not move. This also happened. That way not only the *diuri* got elected. Also those two men (*oron sakowa*) were awarded divine distinction who would be entitled to blow the jungle bison horns on the occasion of all big village feasts just as those men (*da: go:*) entitled to carry on the shoulder the pots of water needed for the sacrifices to be performed at the village grove, (*desauli*). *Desauli* refers to the sacred village locality and at the same time the main protective spirit of a village, to whom sacrificial offerings are made in the course of the main village feasts, of which there are quite a few. Finally divine consent was demanded for those called *ramba rid* who are entitled to grind black lentils, a ritual pulse (*ramba*) for the same purpose. The success of the ritual had literally been in the two boys' hands. At last water was sprinkled on the ground by the preceding village priest thus inviting the gods to leave.

The complete ritual had lasted 35 minutes. When it was finished, the boys - should I really call them children? Was there anything incomplete, incompetent, immature, imperfect, or deficient about them in this situation?

- laid down the bamboo halves and left the scene as matter-of-factly as they had entered it.

Indeed, in terms of age they might clearly be considered deficient if being biologically adult was expected to serve as the norm. However, the boys' integral involvement in this very ritual - and it is not the only one - reveals that their being so young turns out to be the very source of their value, of their purity, of their closeness to and their relatedness with the realm of the divine. As intermediaries they are entitled to cross a bridge that is open to other boys their age, but certainly not to (male) adults. In this particular situation, I argue, their being a 'child' is not a deficiency, but rather a qualification, a marker of excellence, a constitutive prerequisite for the ritual to be performed adequately - or, more importantly, to be performed at all. The example illustrates that Ho children, in this case boys, are entrusted with ritual duties and they experience early in their lives that they are capable of contributing to the (recreation of the) societal whole. As Ho children are usually allowed to witness and participate in all kinds of cultural affairs that accompany the yearly crop cycle, they can perform as competent social actors and knowing subjects when it is their turn. Maybe Sahlins might have remarked that Ho childhood was a process of culturally informed growing into personhood or social adulthood.

Conclusion

There are many more rituals where Ho children figure in prominent ways which cannot be elaborated here. All of them would have revealed that although Ho persons may be quite young in biophysical terms, they may act in quite grown - up ways in socio - cultural respect. In this vein the paper has attempted to illustrate that the concept of childhood as opposed to that of adulthood is not a universal given, but narrowly culture bound. It has at the same time attempted to illustrate, how due to some anthropologists' exclusive advocacy of the innocent child in need of legal protection and nutritional provisioning, a child's impressive abilities and cultural performances elsewhere may easily be underrated or even overlooked. Ho children develop not independently of or against Ho *samaj*, as far as I can tell from fieldwork

among the Ho. It may well be that exactly their being socially and ritually competent and active, knowing subjects from an early age within an encompassing meaningful whole, makes them walk tall.

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