

## The Absence of the Child in Ethnology: A Non-Existent Problem?

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**Résumé :** Quelles sont les spécificités méthodologiques et conceptuelles de l'anthropologie francophone de l'enfance ? Celle-ci a pris ses racines dans les « monographies villageoises » des années 1960-1980 et dans les recherches fondatrices de l'École de Fahn à Dakar. En dépit des traditions académiques et disciplinaires, les années 1980-2000 ont maintenu une vision essentiellement culturelle de l'enfant, fondée sur l'observation des sociétés lignagères. La dernière décennie a connu l'émergence de l'enfant comme acteur social au sein de sociétés en profondes mutations. La puériculture est aussi devenue un objet de recherche. Par ailleurs, les « Droits de l'Enfant » ont conduit les organisations internationales à le placer dans la catégorie des « personnes vulnérables » pour lutter contre toute forme d'exploitation et de maltraitance. En dépit de ses apports, l'anthropologie de l'enfance ne bénéficie pas de l'ancrage académique et universitaire qu'elle mérite.

**Mots-clés :** Histoire de l'anthropologie, France, monographie, comparatisme, enfant-acteur, institutionnalisation

**Abstract:** Which are the methodological and conceptual specificities of French anthropology of Childhood? It is rooted in “village monographs” (1960-1980) and in the founding works of the Fahn school (Dakar, Senegal). In spite of different the academic and disciplinary traditions, a culturalist vision of the child has been maintained between 1980 and 2000, based on the study of lineage societies. The last decade was marked by the emergence of the child as a social actor within changing societies. Nursery nursing has also become a research-matter. Furthermore, “Children’s Rights” has lead international organizations to consider the child as a “vulnerable” person in order to fight against the various forms of exploitation and child abuse. In spite of these contributions, anthropology of childhood still do not benefit of any strong academic and rooting.

**Keywords:** History of Anthropology, France, monographs, comparatism, child as an actor, institutionalization

I would like to thank the three organizers of this Conference for having made this meeting possible for French and English-speaking researchers on children and childhood around the world.

Indeed, even if it is generally accepted that research on childhood should have its own place within our discipline, it is unfortunate that ethnological literature concerning childhood is neither widely read, nor really known about, and this contributes to its ongoing absence.

My first point is that it is essential to distinguish between research on childhood and children, and the constitution of an academic field of research. By repeating, over and over again, that children are largely absent from ethnography, we start to think, or to lead our colleagues and even our founders to believe, that nothing has ever been written on children within our

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discipline. However, in the former colonies, there are many texts that are not about children in themselves, but which do contain a great deal of information on children's socialization, on how children learn, on childcare, etc.

This information on children is situated within a historical context. It concerns periods of African history in which data were essentially from rural settings, and were gathered by the actors of African colonization. The documents written by missionary nuns and colonial administrators contained ethnographic data. For example, L. Tauxier, the Deputy Administrator of the colonies, based in Ouagadougou in 1908, and then in the Ivory Coast from 1924 to 1927, was inspired by the methods of the famous sociologist F. Le Play when writing his books describing "models of the family". L. Tauxier even became a member of the Society of Africanists in 1927, and also joined the Society of French and Colonial Folklore, whose vice-president was M. Mauss.

Many of these works considered the child within the context of studies of folklore. The category of "folklore" was particularly dominant at the end of the 19th century (W. Thomas 1846), and was widely used by A. van Gennep as a methodological basis for the scientific study of "popular knowledge" and of various works that were collectively created or produced (i.e. the notion of the anonymous author), such as stories, dances, music, various narrative tales, ways of life, etc. The notion of "folklore" was later substituted by that of "tradition", which is still used today, not without the ongoing difficulties that it raises for ethnologists. Having said this, both terms are associated with oral sources, and not with written documents, which surely explains the somewhat inappropriate reference to the "oral tradition" in societies in the South.

During this period, in contrast to our American colleagues, French anthropologists did not adhere to the culturalist notion of "personality types", whose foundations are built, according to culturalists, during childhood. In culturalism, the first period of the life cycle is only studied in order to better reveal each society's own personality. This view assumes a social and cultural homogeneity, in which culture and the individual merge, giving way to value judgments and abusive interpretations, such as those made by M. Mead in reference to the "gentle, mountain-dwelling Arapesh", to the "fierce, cannibalistic Mundugumor", and to the "graceful head-hunters of Chambuli" ([1935]1963: 15) or such as R. Benedict's assertion that "Japanese babies are not brought up in the fashion that a thoughtful Westerner might suppose" ([1946]2005: 253). In his entry on the ethnology of education in the Dictionary of Ethnology and Anthropology, P. Riesman (1991) emphasizes the circularity of culturalist reasoning, which links behaviors and their interpretations, as if they were part of the same whole. Ruth Benedict tried to define specific national characteristics applicable to the whole population for each people studied, on the basis of the distinction previously established by Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*, and thus opposed the Apollonian culture of the Pueblos - who she judged calm and balanced - to the Dionysian culture of the Dobu and Kwakiutl - in her eyes, a violent and unstable people. Kardiner (1939) pursued the quest for personality types, distinguishing between primary and secondary institutions, as you know.

In spite of theoretical differences, many of the studies undertaken by American culturalists were also explored by (French) anthropologists during the 1970s and 1980s. For example: education, in the broad sense of the term, the first childhood experiences, body care, childcare, breastfeeding practices, parents' attitudes towards children's learning of autonomy, sphincter control; etc. But I will come back to this.

At the time of M. Mead's and R. Benedict's culturalist anthropology, large studies were conducted in Africa by a group of French ethnologists led by the eminent M. Griaule. He organized the Dakar-Djibouti mission (1931-1933) during which he gathered a vast amount of

ethnographic data. He was a pupil of M. Mauss and lay the foundations, in France, for a new research method that was based on the exhaustive and continuous observation of a single population in the first instance, and then on the analysis of their systems of representations in order to explain its workings. Within his descriptions, Griaule dedicates a few pages to children, particularly in *Jeux Dogons - Dogon Games* (1938). He structured French field ethnology, and defended an anthropology of symbolic systems. Some ethnologists think that his search for coherence within the Dogon society was “forced”, and others, such as J. Copans, see it as a culturalist endeavor. Note that, in 1942, he was named director of the Ethnology Department at the EPHE (École Pratique des Hautes Études) and in the same year, as the first Chair of Ethnology at the Sorbonne. M. Mauss (Durkheim’s nephew and student), often considered as the father of French ethnology, mentioned the interest of working on the subject of the child, but in the context of “techniques of the body” - for example, those associated with childbirth or child-rearing.

But it wasn’t until the work of Nicole Belmont (1971), a student of C. Lévi-Strauss (himself a student of Marcel Mauss), that the child became a subject in its own right. In the early 1970s, this French Europeanist anthropologist adopted this approach and dedicated much of her research to the symbolic representations associated with the childbirth and to tales and other stories where the child is a player in the story (Cinderella for example). She re-traced (1981) the career and ideas of A. van Gennep, who is considered by many French anthropologists as the founder of French ethnography, and who contributed making the work of J.G. Frazer known to the French public (with input from M. Izard). Here I’m thinking of the *The Golden Bough*. N. Belmont is considered, by many ethnologists as being the “founder” of the anthropology of childbirth.

In the same school of thought as N. Belmont, we can cite F. Loux (1978), who studied traditions relative to early childhood, and who published many books on birth and on childcare. She made a substantial contribution to the activities of the Museum of Popular Arts and Traditions, created in 1972 and closed in 2005, which gathered material from rural France.

The Museum of Popular Arts and Traditions started with the French collections of the Museum of Ethnography of Trocadéro (created in 1878 during the World Fair, inaugurated in 1882 and closed in 1928). The foreign collections of the former Museum were transferred to the Musée de l’Homme - Museum of Mankind - (created in 1937 by Paul Rivet).

In France, this museum was at the origin of the birth of a discipline: ethnology.

Children progressively parted from the hospitality of folklore and “popular traditions”, at least in Africa, with the constitution of a team of researchers at the Fahn Hospital in Dakar, including the illustrious names of A. Zemplemi, J. Rabain, E. and M.-C. Ortigues between 1962 and 1966.

Children became a scientific object following a psychoanalytical clinical experiment with 178 children attending school in Dakar (told notably in *L’Œdipe africain - African Oedipus*). The Ortigues’ analysis (P. Smith 1967) shows that the reference to the father within the Oedipian complex is present in all societies, even if the “complex is resolved through other paths”, especially through its “displacement” towards the brothers and through the status of the ancestor. At a time when the cult of the ancestors is being questioned among followers of religions that forbid it (Protestantism, Islam), and by the questioning of the relationship between the elders and the youth, new research would serve the social and psychic reorganization of these cultural models of authority (and of the relationship to debt). To this, I would add the issue of fatherhood in contemporary models.

We can consider that currently, there are two very important subjects still need much greater consideration: children's affective suffering and the status of the word of the child (I am thinking, especially, of students working on the issue of parents and health workers informing children about an illness and, more generally, of all the ethnologists who are reflecting on methods for doing research that involves children, and the ethical dimensions that this entails).

For S. Lallemand, who I will come back to, J. Rabain's book *L'enfant du lignage* - The child of the lineage, published in 1979, is the founding book for the anthropology of childhood in France. J. Rabain's work concentrates on children from weaning to the age of between two to six years of age. It does not apply to early childhood (in other words, children who do not speak yet and who are often still being breast-fed in Africa), nor to school children, nor to child workers. Nevertheless, the book raises questions around age, of the definition of childhood and of stages of child development. To cite J. Rabain (2003): "each era or each generation deals with the social periods of the life-cycle in a particular manner".

There is no doubt that childhood is an age category which is difficult to describe because it varies according to cultures, institutions, and local and international legislative norms. Which norms should the ethnologist adhere to? Emic norms? International norms? Of course, his work is more about deconstructing these norms.

J. Rabain's book had the merit of showing how "body-to-body" interactions between the child and his mother transform into "body-to-body" games with his brothers and sisters, which involve food and the first experiences of gift and debt. Within the apparent banality of games in which food is exchanged, the child is perceived, from an early age, both as a social partner and as a subject through which death and origins can be questioned. An implicit "theory" of heredity and inheritance is thus generated, in which the figure of the ancestor continually feeds into that of the child.

The sixties and seventies were a rich period for village monographs (within research in the French territories and in the so-called "exotic" societies). In the anthropological monograph, the researcher sought descriptive exhaustiveness. The objective was to determine a coherent totality within a village community. In France, sociologists experimented with rural village monographs, but mostly for comparative purposes, within the study of social change (H. Mendras 1967). In Africa, geographers also used monographs (1960-1970) to study village communities and "ethnic groups" (M. Couty et al. 1981), as well as for comparative purposes. These were called monographies de terroirs meaning local monographs. Their objective was to investigate the evolution and the transformation of the relationship with production.

Within these village monographs, several studies provide data concerning children's daily lives (see for example an inventory made in the documentation center at the research unit on childhood by C. Ganty). Although children were not forgotten, they were certainly not a privileged unit of observation. Studies on kinship flourished in France, and the individual as a subject disappeared to the benefit of the community. Anthropologists concentrated on lineage societies.

During the 1970s, S. Lallemand published a monograph on a village in Burkina Faso (Mossi). In France, she represents an essential figure for anthropology of childhood. S. Lallemand repeatedly insisted on turning childhood into an anthropological object and into its own distinct field of research. After working on the Mossi family in Burkina Faso, she engaged in a theoretical reflection on the circulation of children in Togo (Kotokoli), in relation to marriage alliances (Lallemand 1977, 1981, 1985, 1993 and 1994). Fostering, a subject largely inspired by the work of E. Goody (1982), is presented within her research both as a form of

child mobility and marriage mobility. This relatively structuralist perspective established links between the status of the wives and that of minor children living outside of the household.

Suzanne Lallemand also encouraged the grouping of several French scientists that worked on different subjects concerning childhood (childcare, desire for a child, breast-feeding, children's status within the household, rituals associated with their development, cultural conditions of skill and competence acquisition and social policies concerning early childhood).

The advantage of this research group was that it brought together ethnographic works with those of French historians. It was no longer a question of only comparing societies from the same cultural area, as our predecessors had done, nor of considering that Northern and Southern societies couldn't be compared, for fear of being considered as an evolutionist. This collection was transferred from the MNHN (National Museum of Natural History) to the EHESS, under my initiative, and later incorporated the collection that had been led at the Sorbonne by the historian and demographer, C. Rollet.

Collaborations with French historians allowed us to become aware of the proximity between views on childhood within children's institutions in 19th century France and those in colonial Africa. Themes such as the "ignorant mother", child abuse linked to poverty, the need for educating women and parental indifference towards the death of a young child were treated almost with the same morality. Medieval historians from our research team also put into perspective P. Ariès' theories on the presumed absence of a "sentiment of childhood" before the 18th century. Their work - especially that of D. Lett (1997), an eminent French historian on medieval childhood - show that many documents and testimonies reveal feelings of love towards children and feelings of despair when they died at an early age.

Unfortunately, this same observation was made by ethnographers in Africa. M.-C. Ortigues published an article on this subject in 1993 entitled "Why Are These Mothers Indifferent?". I had also personally noticed during training sessions for health workers in feeding centers that they claimed to be shocked by women who did not cry when their child died. However, the expression of feelings has since been studied by anthropologists, who have shown that physical and moral suffering can be shown in a wide variety of ways. A few years ago, these arguments led French humanitarians to "abduct" children from Niger in order to give them up for adoption in France. I don't know whether our American and British colleagues read about this affair in the papers, but it became quite a scandal both in France and in Africa.

This situation raises the question of the anthropologist's role as a citizen in our society. Can our knowledge contribute to the fight against incomprehension due to rapid judgments - in this case, about others' feelings?

Our work consists of exploring practices (displaying, fostering, adoption, childcare) and of relating them to models of social and economic organization and to each country's legislation. The representations of childhood are not in the domain of morality. Having said this, we all agree that our research should of course contribute to the improvement of children's life conditions, but without separating them from the economical and political conditions of the country where they live.

It is within the socio-political context and in relation to the health situation in African societies that the representations of the child-sorcerer, of the child who comes back after death, of the deadly child suspected of killing his parents, must be considered.

How can the stigmatization of certain children be explained?

I have often heard people say that the way children and madmen are treated reveals a great deal about a society.

Children are subject to inter-generational breakdowns due to AIDS, internal wars, and social crises. Certain families are not capable of assuming the basic needs of their members any more. Children are subject to their parents' migration and to their mobility, or seek their own autonomy in order to earn their living or that of their family. Instead of protecting them, certain churches designate them as sorcerers, thus contributing to family breakdown. Research on these subjects leads to interesting questions on children's role in labor, in religion and in knowledge transmission.

Throughout our past research, we have considered the child in relation to a lineage, to a community, to a family, to the State. More recently, the child was analyzed within the mother- child dyad. But today, the child has become a full "social actor". Certainly, ethnologists have shown, since the 1990s, that children can be either actors or leaders in rituals (V. Duchesne in Ivory Coast, D. Jonckers in Mali, 2007). I'm thinking of a certain number of French films produced by French ethnologists and assembled at the CNRS by A. Epelboin. These very rich documents show that children take part in offerings, bloody sacrifices, divination, dances and singing.

Many of these films also address care of the newborn. They all demonstrate the great fragility of the newborn child, who often appears as an intermediary, a messenger between the after-life - where they are believed to come from - and this world to which they now have access, but from which they can also depart just as swiftly as they arrive. Films and research both reveal the precarious and sacred nature of the newborn, an ambiguous figure in that it represents, simultaneously, life and death. Ritual preventive measures and name-giving ceremonies contribute to protecting the new-born and to assuring his entrance into the world. C. Haxaire (2002) evokes the Gouro children in the Ivory Coast, who are believed to be ancestor defectors, and thus not entirely human before the age of two. S. Blanchy (2007) describes Madagascan children's ritual baths, which allow them to keep contact with their paternal ancestors. For the Nzebi in Gabon, twins are dangerous and powerful genies who have decided to dwell among humans.

These findings have led researchers who work in hospitals in the north, and who often join us in our seminars and conferences, to reconsider bereavement after the death of a child during motherhood. C. Le Grand-Sébille and M. Dumoulin (2002) have tackled the subject of child death in France from a symbolic perspective.

In other words, our research is not only useful to so-called "exotic" countries - and we refute the term "exotic" in itself. Only context is pertinent when comparing norms, discourses and practices. This research has favored an identity-based approach to the child which shows him or her as a complete individual and places him at the centre of the anthropologist's attention.

In this context, French anthropologists who are today working on childhood are calling for anthropology of childhood to be constituted into a scientific field, just as is the case for anthropology of illness, anthropology of women, etc. The rationale for this is that on the one hand, we need to explore children's role within social change and, on the other hand, we need to recognize and affirm the social impact of our work on child policy making.

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