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Hunting and Gathering by Children and Youths in Owerri Urban, Nigeria: Negotiating Dietary Supplements

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Introduction

In the suburbs of Owerri, children's struggle to survive comes to the fore when one observes the phenomenon of bands of chattering children and youths browsing the bushes on some nights with their local light sources and gathering snails for food or for sale. On occasional nights, in the rainy season, they may gather flying termites. In the daytime, other forms of hunting may also be practised. These children's perception of their hunting activities differs from the perceptions of those who have developed the mindset of saving the children from themselves by opposing these activities. Work forms that appear unpleasant for children in popular perception may be perceived as fulfilling by the children concerned (see Bourdillon, 2009:20).¹

Hunting children relate with the home as well as the street. This suggests that these two platforms of children's existence are not necessarily mutually exclusive but rather coexist in the lives of children. The 'street child' may be interpreted more broadly than only to cover street residents.² Gimsrud and Stokke (1997: 21) include as street children, 'those living within the family whose earnings (on the streets) contribute to household survival'. The child hunters described in this chapter provide an example of children who combine activities on the streets with life in their homes.

A further question is whether or not economic hardship, which in many cases drives foraging behaviour, predisposes households to factor such informal engagements as children's hunting in their survival toolkit? The rewards of the children's enterprise are managed by adults, who are considered most capable of

resource management. In hunting, children therefore largely remain a factor of adult's production processes. Surrendering their earnings is necessary for retaining critical adult protection.

Should hunting among children be called work or play? If it is work, is it exploitative work? What are the hazards involved in this form of work? The fact that child hunting is usually informed by enlightened self-interest on the part of the child and is at times approached with excitement tends to hide aspects that might be deemed abusive. The family can in some circumstances be a subterfuge that masks the exploitative nature of activities which children may successfully be cajoled or cowed into only in the authoritarian environment of the family. Thus, Lange (2000) interprets use of children's work as 'processes geared towards production and domination'. Is this generally or ever a true interpretation?

Do children involved in hunting perceive that they are being exploited? Rather than exploitation they tend to perceive an opportunity for self-expression and agency in general. In many quite different circumstances, attempts to protect children by stopping them from working have failed to attend to the positive difference that working made to their lives: stopping the work sometimes leaves them worse off than when they were allowed to work (Bourdillon 2009: 6-7). While night hunting may be deemed hazardous and while the hazards may be acknowledged by the participants, the willingness among them to meet the challenge of hazards is very real. Is this indicative of possible benefits that outweigh perceived risks? The children have invented strategies to cope with culturally imposed work requirements and to negotiate their existence in a largely adult-controlled world. In this study, we look at the phenomenon of child hunting as a social activity and in the context of urban social ecology of space contestation.

Contexts

This study deals with urban people who are rural in orientation, having been generally raised in rural areas surrounding urban Owerri and having migrated to the urban area. It also deals with children who may have been born to these migrants in the urban area as well as non-migrant indigenous populations that have been swamped by urbanization. The process of urban acculturation is scarcely completed among these groups, most of whom maintain a strong link with their rural roots.

In the 1980s, Gugler (2002) repeated studies he carried out in Nigeria in the early 1960s on urban people's connection to their rural roots. He found that urban people who expressed strong reservations about visiting their villages in the 1960s when they were children or youths, often established strong connections to their rural roots in their adulthood. The urban experience did not translate into the erosion of rural folkways in the African context, and many livelihood options of rural areas were replicated in the urban areas. Most urban dwellers involved

with these livelihood options are found at the urban fringes that serve as their points of reception in the urban destination – an urban zone that might pass for a fresh migrants' zone, with its characteristic mixture of urban and rural lifestyles. This zone seems to be a cultural frontier that retains rural immigrants for a gradual assimilation into mainstream urbanism and eventual spatial relocation of successfully acculturated and usually empowered persons to more urbanized zones.

While many residents of this zone are wealthy persons who have located in this environment to avoid crowding disincentives associated with the urban core, many other residents are poor people who have responded to cheaper housing and lower municipal standards obtainable in the urban fringe. This creates a fertile ground for contestation of the urban space between the two distinct income groups.

A further feature of the Owerri context is that children are expected to make contributions rather than being barred from meaningful work or being restricted to only play and learning. The distinction in the lives of children between play and work as mutually exclusive phenomena is often associated with western thinking (Woodhead 1999:24). In the context in which this study is set, however, children are seen to combine play activities with work activities: play and work are fused. In this way, children yield to a biological inclination to vent their abundant psychomotor potentials while accommodating culturally imposed values of hard work and utilitarian engagement of their time. Beyond this, children often learn to perform tasks competently by playing at them first. This can be observed among Owerri urban poor.

The urban poor in Owerri have limited options in their quest for survival. There is scarcely enough industrial capacity in either the formal or informal sector to absorb them, as their number is swollen through migration from surrounding rural areas. They are therefore innovative particularly in informal economic arrangements. They have tended to deploy children in economic ventures in a bid to adjust to the high challenges for survival that the city presents. In different parts of the Owerri urban area, night-time hunting of snails and flying termites is quite common among children and youths. While flying termites are highly seasonal, being restricted to the rainy season months of May to August, snails are observed for a much longer period in the year. In the rainy months of April to October, snails forage at night and are exposed to gatherers who move in droves, wielding mostly crude light sources. In the dry season, they are hunted by day in cool environments such as under the shady ambience of banana and plantain growth. Flying termites, on certain cold nights, seek out light sources and invade human habitations in their craving for warmth. Through the provision of attractive light, they are lured and gathered in large receptacles. These activities take a good part of the night hours, and sometimes the entire night, featuring particularly children and youths who brave several hazards (discussed below) to hunt and gather these small creatures.

The focus here is on the activity of hunting and its place in the lives of the children that participate in it. The article also considers the dominance of children and youths in these hunting and gathering activities despite their hazard-prone nature; the challenges faced by the children in the activity and adjustments they make to meet these challenges; and the children's interpretation of the activity and of their involvement in it. Some hunting children participate as a form of agency, taking control of their lives. Uche, a 16-year-old boy said:

Our parents do not approve of our joining [in night hunting] but when we see the boys and girls with their lights in the nearby bushes, we are really tempted to join them and we do join. Our parents do not mind when they see the snails we have collected. It is theirs you know.

Evidently, we are also dealing with a context in which children may initiate livelihood strategies.

Methods

Children and youths involved in night-time and daytime hunting and gathering were studied through in-depth interviews and participant observation of their activities. Selected parents or guardians of such children were also interviewed. The study included characterization of the research subjects, motivating factors, social networks, etc. Information acquired generally relates to age and gender of the subjects, amount of money made, extent of commoditization of the proceeds of hunting, occurrence of hazards, conflicts with urban agencies, time cost of the hunt, size of hunting parties, opportunity cost of the hunt, level of domestic application of gathered proceeds, etc.

A total of twelve children who participate in the activity were selected from twelve different hunting groups identified in different parts of the urban area. Grouping among hunters is more pronounced in snail hunting, which features a greater mileage along the roads or through the bushes and bush paths. Termite hunting does not have as great a nomadic component as it is largely point-specific, being highly associated with dwelling units that tend to attract mainly children in their immediate environments. Another reason is that while snail hunting proceeds over a fairly long period, allowing usually fluid groupings time to consolidate, termite hunting is only for a short time and is impossible to plan in advance given the uncertainty of timing in termite activity. Thus hunting parties transcending dwelling units hardly evolve in termite hunting. Study subjects were selected through the purposive sampling technique using the snowball method. Five parents or guardians of the children were also selected through the same process.

The process of identification of respondents was plagued by a denial syndrome. Some of the potential respondents who were identified denied their involvement in hunting. The problem was solved by paying individualized attention to

respondents outside public view. Some preferred to trivialize the practice by falsely submitting that it was only younger members of their households that were involved. Participant observation helped gain their confidence and also elicited responses. Responses were mainly in the Igbo language, at times poorly flavoured with English, and have been translated into English.

Study Subjects and their Hunting Activities

Children and youths involved in the hunting and gathering of snails and termites are usually aged between 9 and 26. There are some older persons who also participate, but the indicated age cohort dominates the activity. The study population is made up of six boys and six girls aged between 13 and 18 years and only insightful responses from them have been highlighted here. The three male and two female parents or guardians included in the study are aged between 48 and 63 years. They are all artisans and are involved in bricklaying, food vending, carpentry, and trading.

The hunting activity is a social activity in the sense that factors such as need for company compel group behaviour. In snail hunting, favourable weather parameters such as diurnal heavy rains followed by rain-free nights indicate good nights for snails' foraging activity and promote preparations, which may include networking among hunting persons and preparation of light source and receptacles for the hunt. If the weather is good, there could be up to three night hunting sessions in a week. The usual destinations that promise good snail occurrence are refuse dumpsites and other areas of vegetal decomposition.

In the dry season, hibernating snails may be found encysted under cover in cool moist places while some others may be shaken off dry plantain leaves. Night hunting parties spend as much as three hours between 9 pm and 12 am in search of snails – moving from one area of anticipated snail activity to another. This movement may take them up to 5 to 10 kilometres away from home, through bushes that may be interspersed by human habitations. In the course of this movement, they encounter various forms of opposition from home owners apprehensive of their trespass and security guards wary about the security risk they pose and the potential cover their presence can offer miscreants. Security guards therefore confront these hunting groups and refuse to yield space to them. Encounters of the two groups are always unpleasant, with the children complaining of various forms of victimization including beatings.

Children's hunting cannot be scheduled to fall at weekends or with some regularity so as to reduce its disruptive tendencies, because snail foraging activity is not controlled by the hunters. Snail hunting may therefore disrupt schooling in terms of sleep deprivation costs. Sometimes children are reluctant to disrupt their lives in this way and are pressurized to take part by parents or guardians. However, hunting children are largely willingly motivated by the utilitarian value

of hunting and recreational and social opportunities they derive from it. Consequently, in some cases, the children participate in snail hunting against parental advice.

Children who participate in hunting snails include both domestic servants and children living in their own homes. Households that participate in these activities tend to maximize returns by mobilizing as many members of the household as possible.

In termite hunting, hunters are usually taken unawares by the termites, which have uncertain swarming regimes. It is therefore difficult for some to prepare in advance. When termites swarm close to midnight as is common, many households may not have fuel to maintain lighting and attract the termites. Termites are also known to gravitate towards strong light sources in a neighbourhood. This habit is usually to the disadvantage of the poor who may not have electric power – the usual source of strong lighting. While most households tend to gather termites incident on their dwelling units, some households do take advantage of stronger light sources existing elsewhere in the neighbourhood. This may involve movements that may extend up to eight kilometres from their dwelling units in search of strong security lights or street lights. Gathering flying termites may take up to nine hours between 11pm and 8am, although gatherers may decide to call off the activity at any time. While adults may choose to participate only at the peak of termite swarming, it is usual for children to endure until after the swarming when they pick up descended wingless termites that are scurrying for cover. Children may hunt up to 8am, lifting objects off the ground to expose these termites. For children therefore termite hunting can be quite disruptive of their activities, including schooling. Scheduling of the activity is out of the question as termite hunting can only take place while swarming lasts. Children compete among themselves over gathering of large quantities of termites. Household mobilization for termite gathering includes most members of the household.

Social Networks of Hunting Parties and the Power of Grouping

The grouping of snail-hunting parties among children is of fair regularity. Obinna, a 14-year-old boy said, 'I hunt with two of my siblings. We are usually joined by three or four others. So five or six of us gather before we move'.

The children value company and its role in dispelling fear. The social grouping of hunting parties mirrors the group mentality of other street-level groups. They tend to be reactions to a collective fear and/or shared sense of social disapproval. Though each hunting child is as helpless as any other in the face of any real danger, their group mentality provides them with a feeling of mutual assurance of safety. In analyzing psychosocial impact of child work, Woodhead (2004: 323) observed:

Most types of work do not impact on a lone child but on children as part of a work group, a family group, a peer group etc. These wider groups can be important in providing a shared sense of identity and support, buffering the impact of difficult circumstances.

Shared impacts are more manageable by children and therefore leave less psychological injury on them. Thus, UN HABITAT (2006) noted that 'quality relationships are important to youth who can provide peer support and guidance to others....' The phenomenon of grouping among hunters is not free of usual regimentation associated with human groups. In night hunting, leadership requirements come into decisions on movements, timing, conflict management, and moderation of play; and without forms of social control, the activity cannot go on. Snail-hunting groups have to be large enough to form critical mass that will transcend the children's fear threshold and provide adequate and mutual support for rewarding deep forays into the bushes. They also have to be small enough to guarantee per capita pickings large enough to justify forgone night rest. Thus, all sorts of intra-group and inter-group intrigues involved in recruitment and dropping of hunting mates are encountered in maintaining optimum group strength.

Children's Hunting and Urban Space Contestation

Besides intrigues among themselves, hunting children must sometimes contest for urban space. In every contest, the more resourceful and endowed have an advantage over others. Children and youths suffer disadvantages since urban space use is also a social construct based mainly on adult world-views. Children's recreational and work activities may be deemed inferior to adult activities and be forced to give way in the contest for urban space, even to adult leisure activities.

Chawla (2002:228) outlined indicators of environmental quality from children's perspectives to include peer-gathering places, green areas, variety of activity settings, freedom of movement, freedom from physical dangers, and freedom from social threat. A breach of these indicators occasioned by adult applications of the urban space is common in many areas and it affects children's use of the urban area for activities like hunting. Based on experience in South Africa, Samara (2005) contended that perception of street children as a threat to social order indicates 'ongoing struggle over public space'. In suburban Owerri, there is elite resentment over the night-hunting behaviour of low-class children and youths. The tendency is for the elite to be intolerant of these 'excesses' of peasant children/youth, and to employ urban management agencies, like the hired security guards.

A 15-year-old girl, Ada, reported:

I used to participate fully [in hunting snails] but since the neighbourhood hired a night vigilante outfit, we have had a couple of unpleasant skirmishes with them on the hunting trail, and as a result, my parents stopped me from further participation in it.

Also, a parent, 60-year-old James, a male bricklayer said:

I would rather that my children do not join the hunting, but they seem to enjoy it. We did all these things while growing up in the village. The children are in the urban area which presents a whole lot of challenges. The idea of having children out in the bushes at night is becoming scary in the face of kidnappings for ritual purposes. The world has changed.

Children are not, however, always losers in contests for urban space. In some circumstances, children are quite able to negotiate their use of it. Citing the experience in conflict situations in which children may be allowed to forage and scavenge in areas controlled by security forces where adults are barred from doing so, Boyden (2003) noted that children do not always have more limited options for survival than adults. Could adults convince local vigilante or security groups that they are actually hunters if confronted while wandering at night? They would not have the same measure of success achievable by children. Children more easily establish innocence of their motives. This contributes to children and youths' dominance of these activities. There is a strong youth presence in night life consumption as elsewhere in the world (Chatterton and Holland 2003:68). Youths tend to look out for justifications for their usual tendency to retain an outdoor presence far into the night, longer than older people, and hunting may provide this opportunity. Another dimension of urban space contestation is therefore that of adults' insistence on clearing the outdoor nightscape of human presence against a youth inclination to populating and enjoying such nightscape which is usually free of 'irritating' adult content.

Distinctions in the Street Experience

I have pointed out that perceptions of street children comprise part of the contest for urban space. What is the public evaluation of the child hunter and particularly the night hunter? Does the usual stigma of the street child apply to the child hunter, who is usually domesticated? The sentiments expressed in the interview responses mirror the perception of street children and their activities and the usual public hesitation to accommodate them. A 14-year-old boy, Emma, discussing the wisdom of group effort in hunting, comments in a mode common with street children:

The night time is a fearful time as it is dark all around. Anything can happen. If you are alone hunting in the night, you are looking for trouble. You could be targeted by miscreants or accused of sundry criminality.

Also Maretha, a 48-year-old food vendor maintained:

Gathering termites around the house? Yes, my children get into that, but hunting for snails in far away bushes? No I don't think I have the heart for that. The children

may however pick snails from around the house. Poorly minded children used to the outdoors are more competent for the long-range hunts.

Hunting children tend to suffer the perceptions of others due to the street orientation of their activities. Many therefore deny the hunting status because survival on the street is easily linked to negative behaviour. Do these children share the usual characteristics of street children? Adoption of socializing and survival strategies among street children such as existing in clusters (Rizzini and Butler 2003) is also seen among child hunters. Their similarity to street children does not arise from family dysfunctions commonly associated with street children, but rather from their apparent reckless abandon associated with street life.

However, there is no sharp dividing line between street life and domestic life of children in Africa. Most children are situated at some point of a gradation along the domestic–street spectrum. Many domestic children periodically share the life world of street children, that is, the street experience. Hawkers and night hunters are in this category. Since many children outside those categorized as street children are involved in street life to various degrees, classification of those involved in street life should be based on the extent of domestication of the youths.²

Resort to the streets by otherwise domesticated children like those usually involved in hunting, betrays a discontent with whatever domestic provisions are available. Children who look forward to outdoor succour, entertainment, and survival in night hunting are usually the ones repelled by scarcely conducive dwelling units. The children involved in these hunting activities are mostly from poor artisan parents operating in the informal sector, who can hardly afford decent housing. To these children, meaningful outdoor engagements come as a relief. Emma, quoted earlier, sums up this observation:

Even on non-hunting nights, I do not usually retire indoors until very late. There are six of us that sleep in that little room and it is suffocating even in the rainy season.

Children of the low-income group are generally, compelled or induced by different circumstances to maintain a presence on the streets even as they maintain a domestic livelihood. This fact is also made evident in the lives of child hunters who may leave home at night to negotiate livelihood on the streets. The street experience is evidently, for most children, a continuum of situations rather than a discernible framework of inclusiveness and exclusivity as regards who is a street child and who is not. This leads to a discussion of the household characteristics of hunting children.

Hunting Behaviour and Household Characteristics

Most child hunters, and all in this study, share the characteristic of coming from poor households, where per capita consumption is low. Such economic factors push them to engage in this activity. Nnenna, a 60-year-old female petty trader relates:

Termites and snails are no longer poor people's food. The rich access them better. I made about N4000 selling flying termites last year. How many poor people can afford to spend as much as N500 on these things like some of my rich clients do? The rich has pushed the poor out of the market for these things. Hunting is the best bet of any poor family that still has a taste for them.

Poverty pushes households to go into this foraging behaviour as a means of supplementing their diets and raising cash income. Though these are regarded as delicacies, some households that produce them do not consume them as they prefer to sell for cash. On the other hand, the buyers are usually from better-off households from the same neighbourhoods, who would not make the sacrifice to hunt but have disposable income to buy proceeds from the producers. Hunting behaviour – participation or otherwise – is a function of household characteristics.

Togunde and Richardson (2006), working on the relationship between child labour and household variables in urban Nigeria, found that size of household, number of children in the household, and number of children contributing to household income are positively correlated with children's hours of work. Children are relied on or co-opted into the survival game where household characteristics indicate requirement of a concerted effort. Large poor households are hardly able to make adequate welfare provisions for members while they enjoy a large pool of labour.

In this study, of the twelve identified households of hunting respondents, nine have more than four children aged below 25 years. All these nine households constitute initial units of hunting parties around which hunting teams crystallize. Small households tend to be able to provide for the household's needs and are less inclined to seek extra income from hunting. The observation supports the household production theory that resource constraints drive parents to maximize household wealth (Togunde and Richardson 2006). This can involve deployment of children in productive activities.

Generally, vulnerability predisposes a family to reliance on children's labour to supplement family income. At the same time, where housing is poor, household members tend to maintain an outward orientation and an affinity for the outdoors that may culminate in foraging behaviour. Apart from housing, a household characteristic that predisposes children to night hunting is poverty, the dominant factor that drives child labour (Bass 2004:182). Related to this is the decline in urban diets which affects protein and calorie intake among the poor in the face

of declining wages (Potts 1997). The poor have reacted to this situation by sourcing food from outside the market, including such activities as hunting termites and snails.

Although children take part in night hunting spontaneously and for fun, the productivity of this activity and its importance in the household economy give it characteristics of work. Indeed, children find their working day extended at times by four to six hours, sometimes extending to 2 am or even daybreak.

The uncertainty in the timing of termite swarming means that constant vigilance is required. Nkechi, an 18-year-old girl recalled:

On one occasion last two or three rainy seasons, we [she and her household] woke up in the morning only to realize that the termites had a field day through the night. The large heaps of shed termite wings testified to it. Unfortunately our neighbours had helped themselves without alerting us. It was a sad day for us and we blamed our neighbours for their selfishness. Since that time, we have learnt to watch out when the termite season shows up. At times, you may just have to interrupt your sleep to find out.

Mixed Work and Play

While hunting has some characteristics of work, this does not compel children to compromise their playful side. Child hawkers in Nigeria, for instance, are seen to insert fun into the various activities involved in their trade. There is the usual exercise of balancing wares on the head with cultivated inattentiveness while the hands are totally free or engaged in some trivia like computer games. Those that hawk chilled beverages make music from running bottle openers against their plastic crates. A lot of others, wares on their heads, watch videos playing in shops that sell records. The tendency to spice up non-play economic activities also appears in night hunting. Felix, a 16-year-old boy said, 'I enjoy it (snail gathering). Every one of us does. It is as much work as play. We like the competition involved. It is a lot of fun to gather snails because there is joy in their discovery, at times in unlikely places.'

The largely non-coercive and self-motivated nature of participation in these activities is evidently due mainly to the play and social derivatives from them. On the other hand, spicing up work with play could be a way of managing inescapable, unsatisfactory work occasions. The tendency to marry work with play may also be stimulated by environmental conditions operating outside the intrinsic nature of work itself.

Woldehanna, Jones, and Tefera (2008) drew attention to how work can violate children's rights to leisure, socializing in the community, and rest. Night hunting may compromise rest, but it supports aspects of children's leisure and socializing requirements.

Night Hunting as a Hazard

Although in hunting, children mix work and play, this does not remove potential hazards from the activity. While James, quoted earlier, raised fears about the danger of kidnapping night child hunters for ritual purposes, Ngozi, a 15-year-old girl, had other fears. She said:

The danger is much. Neighbourhood dogs that bark at us might bite somebody. There could also be snake bites, and some dangerous wild game. We simply hope that our light sources will repel them. Oh well, we are usually many and that helps.

Uche (quoted earlier) said:

There is a real fear that some may mistake us for thieves and possibly shoot at us. We hear of such mishaps, though there has not been any such incident I know of. Robbers do not wield local candle like we do of course. This factor makes hunting with torch light confusing and dangerous. I guess it is because we [child night hunters] chatter a lot that the public differentiates us from night marauders.

It can be seen that it is not all fun for the children even as children tend to extract some form of excitement from situations of uncertain security.

Sleep deprivation is one of the consequences of night hunting that may impact on health and other activities. Julie, a 15-year-old girl noted, 'Termite hunting... can take an entire night. You are useless for school or anything else the next morning.' The focus in literature has been on effects of child work on education. Other areas of livelihood are also affected.

I have pointed out that children of poorer households are more likely to take part in this productive activity. The propensity to judge such activities as hazardous is also related to households' level of welfare. In highly constrained households, risk awareness assumes a form of cognitive dissonance as the pressure for survival overrides safety concerns. In richer households, on the other hand, risk aversion is high and small risks may be overblown, and protection from hazards is emphasized.

Benefits of Children's Hunting in the Home

There are advantages to compensate for the hazards. Apart from the enjoyment, hunting can provide economic and social advantages to urban youths. It may not be possible to identify persons who have been significantly enriched by earnings from night hunting, but we cannot deny the differences it may make in the family menu and income profile of poor households.

The usual major breadwinners, parents, benefit from any freely obtained supplement which they might otherwise have paid for. Beyond benefiting parents, some children target personal items that also usually fall under parental responsibilities, which may come as a relief to parents. Iyke, a boy of 17 years said, 'I keep my snails till they are plenty. Then I sell them and make money. Last year I bought myself a pair of sandals from the money I made.'

The place of hunting in the diet of households is also significant. Children's efforts towards their survival through activities in the subsistence sphere of the peasant economy are highly acknowledged in literature (e.g., Nieuwenhuys 1996). Termites in the diet add an element of luxury to the family menu. Josiah, a 58-year-old male carpenter, commented, 'Who does not consider the *aku ebe* (flying termites) delicious? All my life, I have eaten it. I don't know why it is so appealing. Perhaps it is due to its high seasonality.'

Beyond the utilitarian function of night hunting in participating households, there are other psychosocial aspects to it. Nnorom, a 63-year-old male trader, commented:

You cannot compare the resourcefulness of those that engage in these enterprises [hunting activities] with that of those who do not. These activities build discipline, social harmony and realistic adjustments to expectations. The mere fact that you cannot predict what you are going to get from the bush is a humbling experience. Your colleague may gather far more than you and in that realization, you grow to appreciate the spirit of fair competition.

In line with value orientation, Woodhead (2004) identified survival, distraction from main vocation, and a way of learning responsibility or of attaining greater autonomy, as functions of work in children's life. These are all relevant to the experience of child hunters.

The Paradox of Children's Agency in Hunting Activities

Children's activities to enhance their survival are not entirely free from adult control and supervision. Concerns about the 'impropriety' of children's night hunting occasioning institutional and other constraints against the practice restrains children's choice on their diet and income pursuit. The unpopularity of these restraints among children is seen in the willingness of some to get around them, for instance in hunting in defiance to parental disapproval.

In many cases, the child works but the parents or guardians take charge of the proceeds. Jane, a 16-year-old girl, had this to say:

You think I know how much money is made from the hunts. Well, I do not. All I know is that everything we get from the bush, mine and my siblings' go into the common pool. Mother dispenses as it pleases her. We eat much of what is collected and scarcely have enough to sell.

Although children exercise some agency in this field, parents and guardians control the produce. This orientation tends to interpret children as competent wage earners and incompetent resource managers. Thus, children only have choice, constrained by age and gender-appropriate behaviour, and by those related to access to key resources (see Whitehead, Hashim and Iversen 2007). In Igboland generally, it is

said that the child owns hunted game only while in the bush, because on his or her arrival from the bush, ownership becomes that of the homeowners. Children's production activities are, however, facilitated by granting them pseudo-ownership. Parents speak of the proceeds of the hunt as 'the child's', conferring on the children status and pride of ownership. This does not bar their parents or guardians from exercising full ownership rights over the same materials. According such recognition to a child is merely a social construct that promotes their agency. Children may, however, use such recognition to negotiate appropriation of their materials for personal use. Having been socialized in this way, children do not necessarily want to be in control of their earnings. Those studied appear contented with being acknowledged. Ijeoma is a 13-year-old girl and she had this to say about what she realizes from her hunts:

I don't sell. All I know is that my mother keeps some of it for us and sells most of it in the market. She buys things for us from the money she makes. I feel proud to contribute to family income and I enjoy the blessings I get from my parents.

Children may derive fulfilment from activities the adult world considers negligible or unpleasant. This calls for a need to look at these children's activities from their perspective.

Conclusion

Children and youths opt to exercise agency to negotiate their sustenance in the Owerri urban area by hunting and gathering small game for food and or for sale. Children's agency in this activity is, however, restricted to the extent that adults usually exercise control over the enterprise and proceeds from it. The study analysed the practice as a livelihood option and as a phenomenon of interest exhibiting varied forms of contestation in urban social ecology. These hunted natural resources provide avenues for engagement in both work and entertainment, allowing children to enjoy being productive.

Hunting children, despite their domestic derivation, are able to enjoy life of the streets, characterized by the rugged confidence to meet the challenge of hazards. This leads us to a rethink of popular definitions of the street child to accommodate irregular persons that may occasionally stray into street life from their domestic base.

Household characteristics of poverty tend to give children an outdoor outlook that favours foraging behaviour, both for the rewards it offers and for the escape from crowded homes. Hunting children acknowledge the existence of varied forms of hazards, but they do not see themselves as exploited persons, irrespective of this difficulty and the involvement of adults as beneficiaries. Most of them participate willingly in hunting driven by, among other factors, the play and social aspect of it. From the high level of motivation observed among hunters, hunting can be said to be a form of improvised recreation activity, justified as work by its material productivity component. Also children's agency as exemplified by hunting operates within adult-erected child disempowerment structures.

Percy-Smith (2002) documented many young people's views of their neighbourhoods and the emphasis is on conditions that tend to reduce their application and enjoyment of urban space, including restrictions on young peoples' use of neighbourhood space. In our study area, absence of designated neighbourhood parks and recreation/playgrounds might have occasioned the combination of work and play in bush foraging activities. In this regard, there is a reinforcement of the idea that night hunting may also be seen as a form of improvisation by children to attain desired recreational goals in environments that have not made adequate arrangements to accommodate their youthful exuberance. Hence, wherever children find themselves, they tend to invent opportunities for play. Urban development is pushing children's play activities out of the environments where they are of potential nuisance value to the adult world and at times out of safe spaces. Play is therefore being taken to non-play areas. However, the attitude of children in making play a part of livelihood pursuits like hunting shows that negotiating the social and environmental space is a part of environmental awareness/cognition which is an important part of child/youth development.

Notes

1. Nieuwenhuys (2000) reported that factory girls who travelled for seasonal work in prawn factories in Gujarat and Maharashtra perceived the work as desirable while others saw it as exploitative and abusive.
2. On-the-street status of street children appears in several classifications: 'floaters' and 'runaways' identified by English (1973), 'missing children', 'absconders', 'homeless children', and 'drifters' identified by Richter and Van der Wall (2003). Categories such as 'seasonal street child' or 'diurnal/nocturnal street child' that can let one into the extent of detachment of the street child from the domestic life are not emphasized.

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