

Susanne Gehrman, Charlott Schönwetter (eds.)

The Ubiquitous Figure of the Child Soldier

Interviews with African Writers, Academics and Cultural Activists
followed by a Comprehensive Bibliography

Susanne Gehrman, Flora Veit-Wild, Tobias Wendl (Hg.)

LuKA

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Introduction

Talking about Child Soldiers in Literature, Film and Society. Lessons from African Writers, Academics and Cultural Activists

Susanne Gehrman and Charlott Schönwetter

When the KONY2012 campaign went viral, the presence of African child soldiers in Western media was nothing new. Photographs and film clips taken on the streets of Freetown, Monrovia or Mogadishu showing young boys wearing a Kalashnikov, obviously child warriors, had by then become icons of Africa in the late 20th and early 21th century. However, KONY2012 marked a kind of anticlimax in the public discourse on the use of children in African wars that had been prominent in the 1990s and in particular in the decade after 2000. Clearly, the makers of the campaign did not expose the complexity of the Ugandan civil war in an accurate way, and they handled the topic of child soldiering for extremely emotional and moralistic purposes. Consciously or unconsciously, the debatable campaign put the finger on some of the major dilemmas when it comes to the discourse on child soldiers in general and African child soldiers in particular. The question that needs to be addressed is how victims who are also perpetrators of violence can be adequately represented without taking away their individuality and their agency as human beings. How can warlords and national armies be stopped from using children – through medial campaigns and international justice or through internal economic and social restructuring of African societies that still suffer from the consequences of slavery and colonialism? And what role do the arts and narratives play in this process? How can the use of children in recent African wars, a painful reality across the continent, be visualized, discussed and written about without reifying Africa, once again, as a primordial place of evil?

The interviews and bibliography collected in this book are a result of our German Research Foundation-funded (DFG, 2015-2019) research project on the representation of African child soldiers in narrative artistic genres (literature and film) in which the persona of the war child who is also a trope, a figure of meaning, has flourished over the last twenty years. In this project, we analyse how representations of African child soldiers are constructed by African and Afro-diasporic authors and filmmakers, which narrative, rhetorical and visual aesthetic strategies are used and how testimonial texts by former child soldiers as well as fiction contribute to an alternative discourse on this ubiquitous figure

that goes beyond Western mainstream media. In addition to studying the cultural productions, we found it important to speak with colleagues and artists based in Africa and its diaspora who have worked on the topic in creative or analytical ways in order to explore African perceptions of the literary, medial and cinematic boom on the African child soldier. Many of the interviews turned out to be revealing; they offer important insights into the reception of the child soldier figure and its ambiguities in Africa, while they also show the social urgency on the continent to deal with the aftermaths of wars and their collective traumata in a productive way.

The cover of our collection of interviews features the photograph of a sculpture by Serge Amisi, a former child soldier from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Today, Amisi is a well-known actor, dancer, sculptor and writer based in France. The piece which is taken from his *Sculptures ferraille* series shows three rusty figurines who are confronting each other. In this configuration, two headless figurines point their rifles at the third subject, the only one with a face: the widely open mouth of the third figurine reminds one of *The Scream*, Edvard Munch's famous painting, minus the hands that hold the head – Amisi's screaming person does not have any arms and hands. All three figurines are dismembered and hence fragmented: headless, armless, handless, and partly footless. The sinister sculpture aptly captures the loss of reason, the senseless violence, the fear, the pain and the falling apart of human beings at wartimes.

The overwhelming feelings conveyed through Amisi's sculpture are equally present in his testimonial narrative *Souvenez-vous de moi, l'enfant de demain. Carnets d'un enfant de la guerre* (2011). This text is but one of many testimonies that have been published over the last twenty years, some by local African publishing houses, but many more on the global – read American and European – book market. The most prominent example is Ishmael Beah's memoir *A Long Way Gone*. This book from the then relatively unknown writer was published in 2007. It was selected by Starbucks as their book of the month and thus displayed and sold as the sole book in all their US stores. Subsequently, the memoir became a bestseller, was included in school and university curricula, and translated into several languages. But the book was also at the centre of a controversy in which Beah's account was accused of not being factual in all instances explored in the memoir. The book, its marketing, and the way it was discussed, indicates the way African child soldier narratives can be commodified and critically scrutinised at the same time.

The corpus of fiction written on child soldiers has equally grown to an imposing size. Despite not being the first fictional texts employing the character of the child soldier, Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy* (1985) and Ahmadou Kourouma's