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### Beyond Agency's Limits. "Street Children's" Mobilities in Southern Ghana

*Para além dos limites da agência. Mobilidade das "crianças de rua" no sul do Gana*

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## **BEYOND AGENCY'S LIMITS. "STREET CHILDREN'S" MOBILITIES IN SOUTHERN GHANA**

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### **Beyond agency's limits. "Street children's" mobilities in southern Ghana**

*As a response to widespread conceptualizations of street childhood in the global South as a state of misery and marginalization, recent studies tend to portray street children as social agents. However, many refer to "tactical" or "thin" agency in order to point out the limited scope of those young people's practices. Yet, the problem of acknowledging a lower degree of agency is that it separates children and youth living in environments "outside the norm" from those who stay with their parents and attend school. This constellation is particularly inadequate in the realm of street childhood in the global South, as it constructs fixed entities of different life worlds that are indeed fluid since street children frequently move between the various domains of socialization. I propose that the social, spatial and temporal mobilities of street children can best be explored through children's biographical life stories, focusing here on street children in southern Ghana.*

**Keywords:** street children, agency, youth, social mobility, victimization, Ghana

### **Para além dos limites da agência. Mobilidade das "crianças de rua" no sul do Gana**

*Em resposta às conceitualizações generalizadas da infância de rua no Sul global como um estado de miséria e marginalização, estudos recentes tendem a descrever as crianças de rua como agentes sociais. No entanto, muitos referem-se à agência "tática" ou "fraca", para salientar o limitado alcance das práticas desses jovens. Porém, o problema de reconhecer um grau de agência mais reduzido é que ele separa as crianças e jovens que vivem em ambientes "fora da norma" daqueles que ficam com os seus pais e frequentam a escola. Esta constelação é particularmente inadequada na esfera da infância de rua no Sul global, já que constrói entidades fixas de diferentes mundos de vida que de facto são fluidos, uma vez que frequentemente as crianças de rua circulam entre os vários domínios de socialização. Proponho que as mobilidades sociais, espaciais e temporais das crianças de rua podem ser melhor exploradas através das histórias de vida das crianças, focando aqui as crianças de rua no sul do Gana.*

**Palavras-chave:** crianças de rua, agência, jovens, mobilidade social, vitimização, Gana

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Working children and youth in African settings often provoke dichotomous reactions of either romanticization or victimization. Yet, such either-or categories hardly reflect local understandings of childhood, youth, and work in Africa (Spittler & Bourdillon, 2012). While recent studies on young people in Africa stress their social marginalization (see most prominently Honwana, 2012), the question of young people's agency is never far off. However, as Lancy (2012) and Eßer (2016, p. 49) argue, the concept of agency in studies on children and youth has often been used with levity and scholars have rarely engaged with the wider debate in relation to structure. Indeed, as Durham (2008, p. 151f) points out for African settings, it is often unclear what kind of agency is attributed to children and youth in such studies. Nevertheless, in recent years and concerning children and youth in Africa and the global South more generally, various scholars have proposed approaches to specify young people's agency. Most notably, they deal with children and youth affected by difficult social environments such as "street children"<sup>1</sup>, a particular group of young people seemingly widely disconnected from parental care and dependent on making a living on their own. Today, the ascription of certain forms or degrees of agency has become the dominant academic approach to capture those children's and youth's coping strategies or creativity in problematic life worlds and to overcome economic hardships, misery, and social marginalization. Here, agency is most prominently conceptualized as "thin," "restricted," "tactical" or "limited," implying the notion as if agency was a quantified possession that young people such as street children hold to a lesser degree than others.

Initially, this development seems valuable as these particular groups of young people seem to embody vulnerability and marginalization as well as the creativity and potential to overcome hardships at the same time. However, as I will argue with reference to street children as a particular group of working youngsters in southern Ghana, acknowledging a lower degree of agency separates children and youth according to normative, primarily Western-based perceptions of what is an adequate environment for growing up. It victimizes those who live or work in settings outside the norm while uncritically idealizing those youngsters' living conditions who stay with their parents and attend school. It thus constructs

<sup>1</sup> Generally, the term comprises young people over a wide age span, including children and youth. While my informants were between 14 and 16 years old at the time of research, "street youth" seems to be the appropriate term for them. However, I refer to "street children" in order to link my study to the broader debate of "street childhood". In addition, a critical understanding of the term and its normative implications is often indicated by using inverted commas. This is done here when terms are mentioned for the first time. In order to refer to an existing debate, I then use the terms without such a marker. "Street" is used as a synonym for all places where children who work and stay (not necessarily continuously) in public places like bus stations, markets, parks, roads, etc., and is usually separated from "home" or "family," seemingly normative and ideal places for growing up.

fixed entities of different life worlds that are rather fluid. Hence, it is not so much a question of the degree or quality of their ability to act but of various spatial, temporal, and social mobilities: the fluidity between home, street, and other potential locations and the social trajectory of a child or youth both as everyday achievement and over the life course. Acknowledging temporal, spatial, and social dimensions of children's and youth's mobility helps to overcome analytical shortcomings about the agency of children and youth confronted with a seemingly inadequate life world of the street.

Methodologically, this paper incorporates a perspective that is based on oral life stories of children and youth in the southern Ghanaian cities of Ashaiman and Accra. Of the more than 50 of such conversations that were recorded over several different field stays between 2004 and 2016, four representative cases are presented. In this context, however, listening to street children's voices is not an end in itself. While this perspective sheds light on the actors' actual processes of social embeddedness at the various sites, their accounts need to be put into context in order to provide sound standing representations of their biographies (James, 2007, p. 266; Spyrou, 2011).

## Street children: the loving family's other?

Roaming around markets, bus stations, and other public places in African urban centers, it is rather impossible to overlook working children and youth who engage in various informal economic activities. One is accustomed to working youngsters particularly in places like Ashaiman, publicly known as one of Ghana's rapid growing shanty towns in the surrounding of the country's capital Accra (Owusu, 1999; Ungruhe, 2010). When I first embarked on fieldwork in 2004, I was interested in a seemingly particular group of young informal workers: street children. Tunjay<sup>2</sup>, Ben, and some of their friends were among the first of those kids I met at the main market, a usual place to work and spend the nights for many. During the day, they worked as *scraps*, collected discarded metal and sold it to merchants. We started chatting about football, school, work, and other things until some of the boys decided to sleep and others roamed around without me. I came regularly and was surprised one of the following days that Tunjay was not among his friends. "Sometimes we sleep in the house," Ben said, casually. Astonished, I asked: "House?" He explained that he meant their families' place. I probed for more details: "Why? How often?" "Few times. My clothes are

<sup>2</sup> I use pseudonyms in order to guarantee the children's anonymity.

in the house and I get food there,” Ben replied but was not eager to go into detail. So I waited for Tunjay’s return one of the following days to find out more about it. Luckily, when we met again, and I asked him about moving between his family and “street life,” he was ready to tell me his story.

15-year-old Tunjay was born in Ashaiman. His parents divorced when he was six or seven years old. Since then, his mother cares for him and his four brothers and his younger sister. His father has married again and no longer lives in Ashaiman. Tunjay does not know where he is now. Tunjay and his siblings went to public schools and his mother paid their school fees. He has not attended school for four years now. “One day my mother didn’t give me money to pay my school fees. I refused to go because I was afraid that the teacher would cane me.” He started roaming around and looking for jobs. He met some boys at the market and helped them search for metal to sell. They became friends and he started going there every day. At times they go to neighboring towns to look for scrap metal if it is too hard to come by in Ashaiman. After some time, and once in a while at first, he began to stay overnight with his friends at their sleeping place at the market. While these overnight stays soon became the norm, he still sees his mother and sometimes he sleeps at her place for one or two nights. She keeps his clothes and gives him a little money at times. “She wants me to come back. I also like but she has to send me to school before.”

Tunjay’s biography is not exceptional. As I quickly began to realize during my field research, street children moving back and forth between their families and friends represent rather ordinary livelihoods. Likewise, Bordonaro (2011, p. 127f) experienced a similar encounter with a street boy in Cape Verde and was equally amazed at the boy’s homecoming as I was with Tunjay’s frequent visits to his mother’s house. Circulating between home and the street does not seem unusual in African settings. Nevertheless, our astonishment when confronted with the children’s mobile practices indicates that returning home – even if it is only occasionally – challenges our common perception of street children’s living environments. But why were we surprised at street children’s mobility in Africa where people’s life worlds – particularly those of the young (Hashim & Thorsen, 2011) – are extremely mobile (de Bruijn, van Dijk, & Foeken, 2001; Hahn & Klute, 2007)?

Such surprise, I would argue stems from the remaining “sedentarist bias” in conceptualizing childhood in anthropology and other social sciences, added by a persistent static and to a great extent victimizing notion of street childhood in academic and children’s rights discourses. In this respect, processes of socialization on the street and within a family are constructed as opposite entities that

deny any form of reciprocal and dynamic exchange between the two (Ennew & Swart-Kruger, 2003; Glauser, 1990/1997; Panter-Brick, 2002; van Blerk, 2005).

The "sedentarist bias" in anthropology has evoked much criticism (e.g., Brettell, 2000; Malkki, 1995). Today, people's mobility is increasingly no longer portrayed as a result or cause of social and cultural crises but as a necessity for the reproduction of the social and cultural fabric. Mobility is seen rather as the norm and not the exception, as the vanguards of the "mobility turn" in the social sciences have argued (see Hannam, Sheller, & Urry, 2006). Remarkably in the mobile African context, children's spatial mobility is continuously identified as abnormal, although studies on child fosterage (e.g., Alber, 2014) and parentless labor migration practices (e.g., Thorsen, 2006; Ungruhe, 2010, 2014) have questioned this notion. Here in particular, mobile minors continuously challenge Western conceptions of childhood "as a period of innocence, play, care, and learning" (Evers, Notermans, & van Ommering, 2011, p. 4) to the extent that NGOs, children's rights agencies and scholars tend to label children's mobility as trafficking or exploitation when certain forms of fosterage and labor migration practices are addressed (see Alber, 2011; Ungruhe, 2010). However, as Hashim and Thorsen (2011, p. 10) argue for the West African context,

Children's experiences are far from the normative globalized ideals of childhood, in which childhood is a period of dependency, involving education, play and leisure; where the only legitimate places for growing up are the "sanctity of the nuclear family on the one hand and the school on the other" (Nieuwenhuys, 1996, p. 242). In this idealized version, the home is perceived as a sedentary unit that offers a safe framework for children's lives, with the "proper" place for children being with the bosom of a loving family.

In this regard, the street serves as the loving family's other: as a public and careless environment for growing up that is hazardous to the children's well-being. The notion, however, that street children are stuck in an inappropriate space has to be questioned as Tunjay's view on his fluid (street) life world indicates. Indeed, studies on the phenomenon have shifted from the notion of street children as passive victims to their actual experiences and strategies already since the mid-1990s (Ennew & Swart-Kruger, 2003; Panter-Brick, 2002, p. 148)<sup>3</sup>. However, similar to the discourse on child mobility in Africa outlined above, this shift has

<sup>3</sup> Debates on street childhood have first emerged in the Latin American context in the 1970s. While street children in African settings have attracted academic attention only since the mid-1990s, they have contributed to shape the global discourse on street children ever since (Adick, 1997, p. 8). The shift in the perspective on street children is not least reflected by participatory methods in child research that have become increasingly popular in studies on and with African street children (see e.g. Bordonaro, 2011; van Blerk, 2005).

not replaced the notion of street children's inappropriate and problematic socialization. Moreover, as Gigengack (2014) argues, while it may have "rehabilitated" some groups of vulnerable children and youth from being victimized as street children, the focus on choice, resilience and the ability to act and shape their lives has led to an academic glorification of their agency and a general romanticization of street life. Because of this overemphasis of agency, more recent studies tend to qualify the actual abilities of street children by introducing nuances and the drawbacks of agency. In the following, I will elaborate on this approach in child research and further discuss its contribution to overcome conceptualizations of the street as the loving family's other and to meet the mobile life worlds of street children.

## Forms, degrees and limitations of (street) children's agency

As agency is always related to the possibilities and limitations that structure entails, restrictions are already an integral part of the concept of agency (Giddens, 1979). Yet, several authors have identified different forms and degrees of agency of children and youth in difficult livelihoods, some of which explicitly address the realities of street life. Other approaches have been transferred from war-affected or the socially immobile (stuck-in-youth) life worlds of children and youth to research on street children. In a study on child domestic workers in Tanzania, Klocker (2007) introduces the concept of "thin" agency to the context of laboring children. Away from their familiar living environments, these children seem to have little room to maneuver yet still apply certain limited strategies to broaden their scope. Therefore, "'thin' agency refers to decisions and everyday actions that are carried out within highly restrictive contexts, characterized by few viable alternatives" as opposed to "thick" agency, that is, "having the latitude to act within a broad range of options" (Klocker, 2007, p. 85). Accordingly, acknowledging a lower degree of agency rather than portraying these children as victims or as having no means to exercise agency helps to reflect "their difficult circumstances *and* their efforts to survive and to build better lives" (Klocker, 2007, p. 92).

The concurrence of actual challenging conditions and the ability to act upon them are also deliberated in Honwana's (2006) study on child soldiers in Africa. Her concept of "tactical agency" derives from child soldiers' position of weakness in which "they may not be fully conscious of the ultimate goals of their actions; and they may not anticipate any long-term gains or benefits". Instead, they try to find means to be able "to cope with and maximize the concrete, immediate circumstances of the military environment in which they have to operate"



(Honwana, 2006, p. 51). Therefore, "tactical agency" enables children to act within an environment in which daily needs and survival are immediate concerns but do not allow strategic planning<sup>4</sup>.

Applying Honwana's concept to a non-war-affected context, Langevang and Gough (2009, p. 752) define the "tactical agency" of urban youth in Ghana as "actions [that] are more a matter of continuously adjusting to a changing situation than having complete control over their lives". In the realm of street childhood, Bordonaro (2011, p. 144) sees the concepts "tactical" and "thin" agency as adequate tools to both acknowledge the motives and efforts of street children within structurally constrained living environments and move beyond "the victims-or-heroes Scylla and Charybdis".

In this regard, applying concepts of "tactical" and "thin" agency to street children's scopes attempts to introduce a middle-way to understand such children's decision-making processes. However, acknowledging a certain degree of agency in difficult circumstances may also imply more problematic connotations of the term, as recent studies in contexts of the global South indicate. Mizen and Ofosu-Kusi (2013) have shown how children's seemingly independent decision to leave their families and try their luck on the streets of Ghana's capital Accra is indeed a vulnerable act. Regardless of their actual motive for leaving their homes, their decision reflects their inability to be dependent on parents and other kin rather than often articulated free choice. Hence, their street-ward migration is problematically pre-conditioned and shows how vulnerability is a determining factor for (street) children's agency. Moreover, Bordonaro and Payne (2012) have introduced the term "ambiguous agency" to refer to young people's subversive potential and activities. Particularly, when they are affected by difficult life situations, children and youth may react contrary to normative social and cultural ideals and perceptions of adequate behavior of minors to cope with their challenging experiences. An example of such an ambivalent exercise of agency is Atkinson-Sheppard's (2017) concept of "protective agency", whereby street children in Bangladesh's capital Dhaka face various hardships and harassments, often from elder street gang criminals, and decide to work for certain gangs and engage in organized criminal activities to ensure survival. Accordingly, the gang provides them with both protection and opportunities to make money. While this may involve violent acts, "protective agency" also stresses the vulnerability of those youngsters. Further, Gigengack's (2000/2008) account of street children's

<sup>4</sup> In his study on children and youth in war-torn Liberia, Utas (2005, p. 57) identifies "victimacy" as "the most limited form" of "tactical agency." However, depicting oneself as a victim of impacts of warfare may serve as an effective mode to gain access to certain forms of support, particularly those offered by international humanitarian organizations.

abuse of glue and solvents in Mexico City does not reflect forms of resilience or resistance but sheds light on the dangerous effects of agency. Sniffing poisonous substances is widespread among these children and has devastating impacts on their health, leading sooner or later to death. But rather than being the victims of structural constraints Gigengack's protagonists seem to be victims by choice. Therefore, Gigengack introduces the concept of "self-destructive" agency to focus on the negative consequences of children's actionability on the street with the goal of contributing to theoretical conceptualizations of street children's livelihoods at large and beyond his area of ethnographic research in the Latin American context. Hence, following his general critique on studies that imply a positive notion of street children's ability to act, "self-destructive" agency should also be applied in conceptualizations of street children's motives, decisions, and activities in African countries.

In sum, the concept of agency, with its various constricting connotations, has recently become the dominant theoretic tool to approach street children's actionability within their specific life worlds. However, it is questionable whether approaches of different degrees of agency may help to overcome common perceptions of street children as either sole victims or heroes and whether they reflect the dynamics of socialization processes within various and interchanging contexts of street children's life worlds. It is also questionable whether such approaches resolve the underlying "sedentarist bias" in the research on street childhood and reflect social, spatial, and temporal mobilities among street children. Yet, research needs to explore and conceptualize street childhood not as a status quo of being but as a dynamic process that addresses street children's dynamic movement between the various "domains" (Lucchini, 1996) of socialization (e.g., street, family, institutional care centers, etc.), and, thus, analyze the role of the street as a creative, yet challenging place for growing up: how do children and youth maneuver through their social life world and how do they make use of their mobility? An actor-centered biographical approach is key to this. In the following, therefore, presentations of life stories reflect upon multifarious motives and pathways of street children and shed light on modes of actionability, social embeddedness, and mobility in their various environments. This approach will then serve as a means to review whether the concept of agency facilitates appropriate conceptualizations of street children's life worlds.

## Navigating mobility

Van Blerk (2005, pp. 11-16) has shed light on the importance of looking at mobility in the realm of street childhood in Uganda and identified three types of children's spatial mobility in this context: moving between various spaces on the street (e.g. between places of work, leisure and sleep), between street and non-street spaces (such as the family) as well as a "nomadic life style" which may involve circulating between various cities. Therefore, not all children and youth share the same degree of mobility. Indeed, as the following biographies show, street children follow different paths and strategies, and some may be more mobile than others. However, as Langevang and Gough (2009, p. 745) illustrate for young people in Accra, spatial mobility regardless of the form dominates young lifestyles in general and looking for job opportunities in order "to become a somebody" reflect the importance of moving more specifically.

In this respect, it comes as no surprise that economic hardships within the family are frequent reasons why children look to the streets to earn money (Bordonaro, 2011, p. 138f). They may support their parents' economic activities by working as market sellers, load carriers, or mobile shoemakers and hence become jointly responsible for the well-being of the family. As Kofi's biography shows, responsibilities such as contributing to paying school fees may serve as a motive for children's economic engagement. I met Kofi and his friends while they were resting after walking the outskirts of Ashaiman where they were looking for scrap metal. They were practicing as acrobats at the roadside and grabbed my attention. We started chatting about work, school and leisure activities. None of them liked sitting in the classroom but preferred their daily routine of scrap dealing and acrobatics. However, Kofi, 15 years old, insisted that he would like to attend school if he had the chance. He went to school before but dropped out a few years ago when attending class four. When I asked him why he had left, he told me that he was the oldest of six children living at home at that time. His three elder brothers had already moved out and were holding down various jobs. When Kofi was in school, he was also working as a load carrier at the market after school so that he could contribute to his school fees. But when his younger brothers and sisters also started school, his parents, his father a harbor worker in nearby Tema and his mother a seller at the local market, stopped paying their part of his fees and he had to leave school. There was no need to push the truck anymore and so he decided to stop. He started to spend more time with his friends with whom he already practiced acrobatics. Some of them worked as scrap collectors and he began following them when they were looking for metal to sell. "We work for one man in Ashaiman," says his friend Malcom, "and go to

Tema or Ashaiman to look for aluminum.” Earning a little money in addition to their performances was appealing to Kofi and he joined his friends regularly. He still stays with his parents, he says, however, sometimes he takes care of one of the small stores at the market during the night. Then, he and some of his friends get little money from the owners to prevent thieves from breaking in. Although his parents are not happy about his absences at night, he says, they cannot stop him since they do not provide him with the financial support he needs to go back to school.

Regardless of whether he (and previously introduced Tunjay) would really like to go back to school, the appeals of street life, making money, enjoying freedom and moving around with friends is underlined in both of their biographies and serve as important factors in decision-making processes of where to spend the day and the coming night. As a family becomes more reliant on the child contributing to an income because of economic hardships at home, sometimes in addition to the loss of a caretaker or in cases of the parents’ divorce, this might lead the child to drop out of school. Financial burdens at home and dissolutions of families are, however, only one part of the story. Friends and the street’s various attractions are the complementary other part and an almost required condition for a child or youth to choose to frequently stay on the street. Ekua’s biography underlines this. I met her when she was 16 years old and loosely involved with one of the boys whom I regularly met on the street. She was staying with some other girls at a friend’s place in Ashaiman. She was 14 when she first joined them, she told me.

At that time, I had friends who liked to go out to dance or watch movies and I joined them. Often, I came home late and was too tired to work hard in school. Sometimes when we came back in the night I couldn’t even enter the house because the gate was locked. Then I went and slept at my friend’s place. So, I quit school then. My parents were not happy, but they couldn’t stop me.

At one point, Ekua did not return home for a whole month. Her parents did not know where she was. She went out with her friends during the nights and spent the days sitting at the roadside, begging pedestrians for coins. “That is how we survived,” she says, however, “one day I went back to my parents because I did not get anything and [had] not eat[en] for the past three days. My parents said I should go back to school and not follow my friends again. But this is exactly [what] had happened. I wanted to be with them and have fun.” Today, she continues to go out with her friends again and spend the nights at one of her friend’s place. When she needs money, she joins her mother and helps her

selling at the market. When she is in the mood or when she feels sick, she comes home to stay overnight. "My mother doesn't want me to do all that, but she can't do anything," Ekua says, nevertheless, "it is good to stay in touch when I need something."

As Ekua's case shows, having a good time with friends is an important asset for enjoying street life. However, social relations among street children go beyond the motivation to simply spend their leisure time together. As Mizen and Ofosu-Kusi (2010) point out, friendships among street children are essential for caring for their basic needs, to the extent that friendships serve as a "survival strategy" on the street (see Ennew, 1996). Their research in Ghana's capital, Accra, shows that:

the possession of good friends may mean ending the day having eaten instead of going hungry; avoiding the frightful vulnerability that comes with the darkness by sleeping in the relative security of the company of others; and of surviving illness or injury (Mizen & Ofosu-Kusi, 2010, p. 452f).

Ekua's stress on sharing a safe place to sleep and joint begging for money to buy food underlines this. At the same time, her quote of not having eaten for three days indicates the limits and fragility of mutual support on the street. It is also important to acknowledge that street children's life worlds are based on reciprocal companionships in everyday life and times of crises. As Kofi's and Tunjay's stories from the street indicate, friendships among street children are also valuable on a different level. Since finding work on the street is essential, load carrying and scrap dealing are, among other activities, appealing jobs for street children of various ages. Although such activities may only seem to require limited skills on the surface, the ability to gain access to structures of niches of labor in the informal economy is a necessity. Certain groups of street children have agreements with customers like scrap dealers or market women. To work in these sectors, it is necessary to get introduced to them by experienced street children and learn the required skills of knowing where to find and sell metal and how to gain the trust of potential customers.

Access to work, sharing secured places to sleep in the night, having support in times of sickness, and being able to get food from friends when necessary, constitute the importance of social relations and mutual comradeship among street children. Whereas this is already a necessity among local children like Tunjay, Kofi and Ekua who have grown up in Ashaiman, it is even more so for children for whom Ghana's southern cities are more or less alien surroundings. Hence, the essential relevance of friendships for individual mobility is best reflected in the

labor migration practices of the hundreds of child migrants who come to urban centers annually. This is most striking in the *kayayei* (head porters) phenomenon, which sees mostly young Muslim females from all over northern Ghana working as load carriers on Accra's and Kumasi's markets and bus stations (see, e.g., Awumbila & Ardayfio-Schandorf, 2008; Ungruhe, 2014; Yeboah, 2010). Girls begin to migrate between the ages of about ten to twelve and are predominantly engaged in earning means to accumulate goods for their dowries. Their migration, however, is mainly seasonal. During harvest activities in the rural north, the girls and young women return to their hometowns in numbers only to return to the cities when extensive farming activities end (Ungruhe, 2014). Amina, 14 years old, is one of these *kayayei*. Similar to most of her fellow colleagues, she went to the country's capital without her parents. "I was 12 when I went for the first time," she recalls, "there is no work at home, so I decided to go. I told my mother and she agreed and gave me the lorry fare. I went with one of my friends who has been to Accra before. We went to Tamale [the capital of Ghana's Northern Region] to take a bus to Accra." Upon arrival her friend led the way to the place where most of the other girls from their hometown stayed. Amina got a place in one of the wooden huts near the market and shared it with five girls she had known from her hometown. She was introduced to the work of load carrying and one of her friends bought her a head pan for carrying the goods to start work. They were looking for customers at the market where traders and people who come to buy all kinds of things need somebody to carry the load. Initially, she found it difficult and was only able to earn enough money to get something to eat. She could neither enjoy the various attractions that life in the city had to offer nor accumulate items for her dowry. She decided to try something else and a friend found her a job as a food seller at the market. Luckily, she never experienced a severe sickness or damaged somebody's goods while carrying them. But she has met many fellow girls who needed money due to take care of such issues. Yet, in the event of such crises, it is common among girls from the same hometown who stay and work together to support each other. Jasira, one of Amina's colleague confirms:

One girl fell sick and we sent her to the hospital. The doctor said it is malaria and that she needs treatment. We all g[a]ve money to buy her the drugs but still she didn't get better. So, each of us gave something to pay the lorry fare and send her home so that her family can take care of her.

Despite hardships of labor and poor living conditions, Amina is keen to try her luck in Accra again after she had returned to her hometown in the farming period. "I will go again because of the marriage goods [for her dowry]," she says.

Usually unaccompanied by parents, *kayayei* live as seasonal street children in the southern cities. They are not driven to migrate because of poverty. Instead, they are motivated both by achieving a degree of freedom and enjoying urban life as well as accruing valuable household items that may constitute a wealthy dowry, which would increase a women's status in the family and the community (Ungruhe, 2018). In the alien city, they build upon social relations with the fellow *kayayei* they know from their home communities. As Amina and Jasira explain, mutual cooperation within a circle of friends (providing access to work, a safe place to sleep and a certain degree of social support in times of crises) is most crucial for seasonal migrants in order for them to achieve their aims of accumulating goods and return home<sup>5</sup>.

## Mobilities beyond agency

Reflecting upon the presented biographies sheds light on various aspects of actionability, social embeddedness and mobility. Firstly, motives and reasons for becoming a street child are indeed multifarious. Often, financial burdens at home and family dissolutions are part of a street child's story. But it is not necessarily poverty or misery that drives children and youth from their homes to the street. In addition, as Ekua points out, the appeal of the street may be the driving force behind children's decisions to leave their families and to stay and work with friends. However, street children's situations and motivations are fluid and subjects to change (Aptekar, 1996, p. 250). Today, the street might offer a better and more appealing alternative than the living environment at home. Tomorrow, perhaps, it might be hard to make a living on the street or the child might be simply ready to go back home after spending some time hanging out with friends. In Cape Verde, Bordonaro (2011, p. 139) identified a kind of "seasonal agenda" among children who move to the street. Public events, festivals and the peak season of tourism present occasions where children find better opportunities to earn money and tend to spend their time in popular public places. This agenda is perhaps most clearly visible in circular migration practices of northern Ghanaian children and youth, as Amina's case demonstrates. Regardless of whether street

<sup>5</sup> Child migrants who look for work in the informal economy of larger cities are not unique to the West African context. Young (2004) refers to the practice of unaccompanied children's labor migration to urban centers in Uganda as "street-ward migration" since for many of the young migrants the street becomes the dominant social life world.



children move from their homes to the street due to family dissolution or financial hardships at home, in search for economic opportunities, in order to enjoy time with their friends, or on a seasonal basis, all biographies have shown that street children are exceedingly mobile and so are their various life worlds.

Therefore, street children are not acting in fixed and separated scopes of home and the street. Instead, they move in a fluid environment comprising both home and the street. Yet, while Gigengack (2014, p. 271f) acknowledges street children's daily and short-term spatial mobilities, he stresses that this reflects social exclusions at play rather than autonomous individual decisions. "The emphasis on fluidity runs the risk of overlooking the structural power at work," he argues, locking children and youth in states of persistent marginalization. However, I would argue, while power relations indeed need to be considered, they do not exclusively facilitate fixed levels of children's and youth's subordination. Relationships, whether with parents, peers, or institutions, are also fluid and constantly reproduced and rather speak to the mobilities of street childhood than the converse.

Furthermore, acknowledging the individual mobile practices and relations of children and youth, their different motivations to move to the street and their varying level of street wisdom, it would be arbitrary to generalize street children's scopes as if they all share a collective lower degree of agency. Whose agency is thick and whose is thin? Whose activities are self-destructing and whose are self-empowering? Is a school kid's agency reflexive and strategic while a working street child's agency is short-sighted and tactical? Finally, at what point may a tactic become a strategy and when does thick agency turn into thin? Acknowledging a lower degree of agency for all street children generalizes the actionability of children like Tunjay, Kofi, Ekua and Amina whose life worlds, motives and decision-making processes differ crucially. Furthermore, it creates analytical boundaries between street children and those at home who may rather move back and forth between the two spheres. In this respect, it is not far from the notion of the street as an inappropriate space for growing up (see Glauser, 1990/1997; Panter-Brick, 2002, p. 148). That is, such depictions are not far from those that confine street childhood to a state of misery and victimhood, a conceptualization that advocates of the agency approach have actually tried to overcome (e.g. see Ennew & Swart-Kruger, 2003).

Yet, street children's practices are not exclusively aimed at achieving short-term goals but may comprise long-term ambitions and social mobility. Children and youth may look for means to go back to school, get a better paid job through networks in the informal economy, become leaders within their batch of work



mates or accumulating a wealth of goods that would lead to a prestigious marriage and economic coverage at home. Therefore, street children's actionability within fluid environments go beyond a lower degree of agency since "tactical," "thin" or "self-destructing" agency implicitly lock protagonists in a fixed state of victimhood and overlook their potential long-term social mobilities. Further, ascribing a lower degree of agency to street children reproduces their othering and sets them outside the Western ideal of growing up in a society. However, people's ability to act rather needs to be studied from within, that is, in relation to the perceptions and possibilities of the particular group of people in question, and not in relation to a dominant outside norm (Mahmood, 2005). Finally, denying process-related dynamics of and interlinkages between street children's life worlds reproduces a "sedentarist bias" that neglects the fundamental relevance of mobility, as acknowledging street children's fluid life worlds is key to understanding the practices and embeddedness of youngsters like Tunjay, Kofi, Ekua and Amina.

Hence, while studies need to avoid fixing entities that street children themselves treat as fluid, and, thus, to actually acknowledge the various forms of spatial and social mobility, it is important to effectively overcome pitfalls of implicit inscriptions of street children's collective misery. Therefore, going beyond the various approaches of agency's limits is central for conceptualizations of the street children phenomenon.

## Conclusion

Far from idealizing street life, the presented life stories of children and youth in Ashaiman and Accra reflect a different notion of the phenomenon than a sole state of victimhood, suffering and misery. Becoming a street child is often rather a rational and strategic decision that entails better opportunities and promises a better life than with economically or socially challenged families (see de Bruijn 2007, p. 276). However, navigating street life usually means maintaining relations with the family. Moving between the spheres of home and the street characterizes children's and youth's life worlds and their trajectories to seek social mobility.

Like Ekua, Amina and Kofi, Tunjay, this paper's first protagonist, is one of those movers. He feels comfortable staying with his friends and he manages to care for his living. Leaving his family was not the only remaining option. Still, his mother cares for him when he visits her for a few days. Rather than being stuck in one place he makes use of both, home and the street. Making money by undertaking paid labor and enjoying freedom on the street does not keep him

from collecting his mother's coins and looking for parental shelter when he likes. Tunjay's mobility between home and the street follows rational and reflexive considerations. It is a constant search for opportunities and implies an active role in creating and utilizing space to maneuver. Moving between the different domains widens his immediate social and economic scope and may lead to social mobility in the long run. Hence, for Tunjay and many others, the mobile life world of the street promises a better alternative to the state of immobility at home.

In this regard, the opening description of young people's engagement in various economic activities in the busy public places of African cities can be read as a reflection of their various attempts to utilize their spatial mobility for their "everyday well-being and their process of social becoming" (Langevang & Gough, 2009, p. 752). Therefore, underlining street children's collective state of being out of place and their seemingly limited options and abilities to act neglects their potential of achieving better lives. An approach that focuses their mobilities may offer a better framework to conceptualizing their social life worlds. While it acknowledges street children's spatial mobility as being inherent to their everyday lives it points to their abilities of achieving both immediate gains and social mobility in the long run. In this respect, different modes and degrees of mobility among street children have to be considered. While some might just move around to find something to eat and a safe place to sleep others follow a long-term vision, e.g. by accumulating dowry items for a future marriage. Therefore, understanding the children's various backgrounds, motives and actions is key to grasp how they navigate street life.

Today, however, we may not know how successful Tunjay, Kofi, Ekua and Amina will be in their individual attempts to achieve social mobility in the remote future. Therefore, a study that focuses on long-term processes of street childhood could explore how children's and youth's navigation lays paths beyond today's struggles and enjoyments (see van Blerk, 2005, p. 6).

In general, future research on street children's mobilities need to take the concept's various dimensions into account and explore the entangled spatial, temporal and social features of mobility. Spatial mobilities include street-ward migration, daily movement and moving between various spheres of socialization (see Bordonaro, 2011; van Blerk, 2005). Temporal mobilities refer to both the daily struggle on the street and mid- and long-term trajectories over the life course. A focus on "street careers" would also imply looking beyond the life phase of childhood and youth and investigate where street life leads in the long run (see Gigengack, 2014, p. 271; Stodulka, 2017, p. 21), and how imaginations and makings of African children's and youth's futures materialize (Martin, Ungruhe, &

Häberlein, 2016). Spatialities and temporalities are both connected to the social dimension of mobility. They do not inherently imply a linear trajectory to better lives but may imply immobilities to a great extent. Thus, it is important to follow Gigengack's (2014, p. 271) call to take the various power mechanisms of street childhood into account in order to investigate possible immobile life worlds and social trajectories. However, whether leading to social mobility or immobility, the various dimensions of mobility highlight the multifarious social processes, dynamics and trajectories of street childhood over time and space and therefore capture a more nuanced and thorough picture of street life worlds. Hence, rather than focusing on limited forms and degrees of agency and spotlighting the bounded status quo of young people's street life experience, future studies on street children should explore the various and interwoven dimensions of mobility.

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