Insight through Hindsight: The Stories of Adult Angolans who Came to Portugal as Child Migrants

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In this paper I reflect on the experiences of adult Angolans who came to Portugal as child migrants. In an ongoing project on child migration and kinship care, I am concerned with defining different patterns of child migration, variations in care arrangements and kinship practices related to looking after growing children. I also interview kindergarten staff, youth club workers, council social workers and people engaged in migrant associations about their perceptions of differences between Portuguese and Angolan educational and fostering practices. However, at the heart of this project is my desire to understand the experiences and views of child migrants and their care-takers. I am categorising informants in the following way:

A. Grown-ups who came to Portugal when they were children, through kinship care.

B. Recent child-migrants (separated children/unaccompanied minors/children living with kin).

C. Grown-ups who have taken care of children of whom they are not birth parents, who has left own children in Angola or São Tomé when migrating, who was raised in Angola or São Tomé by other than their parents or who themselves have children living with others in Portugal.

D. "Control group": interviews with Angolans and São Tomenses to understand the broader contexts for children's up-bringing.

E. Institution and associations that work with children, child welfare and immigration

F. Case studies that have been trough the judicial system, seen from the point of view of different actors.

G. Youth migrants (arrived when they were 18-30)

A question that is concerning me is how to write about child migrants' difficult experiences and parental/care practices that might be seen as 'deviant' to majority perceptions, without reinforcing the idea of '(traditional) African' ways of bringing up children as inferior to European practices or child migration as utterly negative. This relates to Ann's comments yesterday, that although we have the best intentions in describing local and regional patterns of child migration, other parts of the population might be of a totally different opinion and use our data in ways that can create restraints on people's mobility. Also, looking back in time through the stories of former child migrants, the decision-making process of their parents and care-takers negotiated is described to have been made on the base of what they then saw as 'the best interest of the child'. But does this notion carry the same meaning before and after migration has taken place? I return to these questions in the conclusion.

The wider framework of my own project, is firstly my doctoral work on migration / Angolan women in Portugal; and secondly the larger project *Informal Child Migration in Europe* for which I am the coordinator (2006-2009, funded by the Norwegian Research Council). With the concept of informal child migration we wanted to focus on a specific form of child migration, namely kinship care in transnational networks of care. We wanted to place the study of migrant children living in kinship care situations firmly within the social relations of their networks, households and transnational families; as a contrast to seeing them as the 'disconnected actors' some labels tend to define them as (e.g. 'young single asylum seeker'). Also, we made it clear that we were not looking at (formal) adoption, nor trafficking. Our intention with this project has been to look at 'migrating practices', so to speak, in terms of care transference, child circulation and social parenthood (as known in anthropological literature from West Africa and Latin America in particular) among migrants in Europe. Drawing on ethnographic knowledge from other regions (our own and others), we hoped to bring together the study of childhood, care upbringing, and (im)migration (this is at level of constructing research questions and part projects). We argue that the migration of fostering practices, child labour or perceptions on childhood and up-bringing that are uncommon in majority populations are badly

understood by national policy makers and state immigration services. The problem is that the lack of knowledge of the large variety in fostering practices migrants bring with them to Europe (or that move between European countries), result in a structural invisibility. This again, can have serious implications for both migrant children's and their care-takers rights (in terms of access to health services, social services, economic support, residence permits and citizenship). Our projects involve field research in Moldova (2 different projects), migration from Ukraine to Spain (with research in both countries), Ecuadorians in Spain, Angolans in Portugal; migration between Cape Verde, Italy and the Netherlands; and the situation of different categories of child migrants in Norway. One of the most interesting contrast between the projects is how national/distinct discourses in places of origin define the consequences of migration (for all citizens in general and children in particular). Here Cape Verde is on one side of the continuum where it is seen as something normal and partly extremely positive; and Moldova and the Ukraine on the other seeing it as something very negative. In the latter case, the state is blamed for not creating the conditions for people to 'stay at home', making children and parents suffer.

Life-making projects and disruption

The empirical focus in this paper is on grown-ups who came to Portugal as children or youth and who look at their experience in hindsight. The moment of migration and the travel itself has not been mentioned by any of my informants, grown-ups or children, as particularly memorable or traumatising. Judging from their stories, it has been a rather insignificant experience. Analysing different migration narratives and life stories from Angolan migrants, I suggest that in retrospect migration is described and experienced as a social process that stretches over time. It is revaluated and updated at different stages in people's life, according to their experience of living as an Angolan in Portugal; but also the socio-economic and relational situation they find themselves in. Disruption was not, however, a word people would use themselves. Rather, it is my way of interpreting and analysing how migrants (grown-

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up and children) construct their life and migration narratives around certain events that in hindsight have become crucial to how they perceive of themselves.

Before going, the motivation for migrating might have been wanting to make a better life and securing the future of one's family. Most of the stories I have been told start with describing the decision-making process regarding the child's migration. Before the child left Angola, parents, grandparents or other care-takers would have considered their children's future, in particular the educational possibilities they would have in Portugal contra Angola. Migration thus represented a means in these families' imaginaries to fulfil larger "life-making projects" (cf. Åkesson 2004, Carling 2002). Migration can thus be understood through the notions of existential and physical movement, and Ghassan Hage argues that (2005:470),

> We do not engage in existential mobility in order to experience physical mobility. The contrary is true: we engage in the kind of physical movement that defines us as migrants because we feel another geographical space is a better launching pad for our existential selves.

I use Hage's concepts to define migration as a remedy for feeling 'existentially stuck' in a situation where it is impossible to realise the hopes and dreams associated with ones ideal life.

Lisa Åkesson describes how migration is seen as part of the "ideal life" in Cape Verde, and that Cape Verdeans thus use migration as a strategy to fulfil their notion of an ideal life (2004). I define such projects as active engagements with the future. The future, I argue, is a space into which a person's dreams, hopes, and goals are projected; a space that is the final destination for the relational and economic investments of the present. Migration is a quest for the future, but this is not a future defined as a linear continuance in time. I here think of the future as people's "imaginative horizons" or as frontiers "that extend from the insistent reality of the here and now into that optative space or time [...] of the imaginary" (Crapanzano 2004:14). Crapanzano argues that borders can be crossed and boundaries transgressed, but a frontier presents us with something which is "unreachable in fact and in representation" (2004:14). For several of my interlocutors, migration had

represented imaginative horizons that they by migrating had transgressed: they had set about to change their lives in practical terms according to the life they had imagined beyond the horizon of the immediate present.

None of my interlocutors report having taken the decision to migrate themselves. A few of them reported they had thought it would be exciting and adventurous while in most stories it seems like they cannot backtrack what were their original emotions and thoughts connected to the "fateful moment" (Giddens 1991) this has come to represent in their lives. Many of these child migrants have never returned to Angola or even been able to visit their families there. There are many reasons for this, but as grown-ups their perception of their own lives is that these relationships have suffered disruption. Some continue to regret it, but others have 'moved on' and are satisfied with having found belonging through relationships and friendships that have replaced the what they once had or expected from their parents.

Gay Becker writes that "disruption to life is constant to human experience" (1997:190), but that it is "when expectations about the course of life are not met, people experience inner chaos and disruption. Such disruptions represent loss of future" (Becker 1997:4). Personal narratives are a way to rework experience, and as Becker writes, they "arise out of a desire to have a life display coherence" (1997:12). Coherence would in the cases I work with be created by understanding why parents 'sent me away', why one could not live together and who where responsible for the bad things that happened along the road. Not having spoken to any of the parents of these former child migrants, I wonder what thoughts they had in regard to the effect it would have on their children's lives, and not least on the future relation between themselves and their children. I would stress, though, that I am not here using 'home' and 'belonging' to describe ideal and idyllic situations. In my interlocutors accounts, relatedness and kinship were often associated with ambivalence and mixed feelings, as is the case in many people's lives. Rather, I prefer to emphasise the "interrelationship between home as a conceptual space of identification and home as a nodal point in social relations" (Olwig 1998:236). 'Home' is simultaneously a place

where relations of inclusion and exclusion are demarcated (ibid.:230), something my empirical data underscore.

Case 1

Inês was 30 years at the time of the interview. She explains the extreme poverty her family were living through, and the sacrifices her mother suffered to keep Inês and her siblings alive. Poverty was the reason her parents decided Inês would go and live with her mother's aunt. This was natural, Inês said, since her mother herself had been raised by the same woman.

Inês called this woman aunt, and told me she had a very nice relationship with her. After a while, they moved to Portugal were the aunt's husband was already living. Inês was 11 when she arrived in Lisbon, and they moved into a *bairro degragado* called Quinta Grande. All was well until Inês was 14. Then her aunt died unexpectedly. The uncle was by this time, Inês realised many years later, in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease. This resulted in him beating her up, more and more often, and then later asking her how she had hurt herself. Inês was nevertheless thankful to the fact that she had not experienced sexual abuse. After each visit from male relatives, he would call her to say that they were pressuring him to have sexual relations with her, as this was a practice in the region in Angola he was from, Cabinda (Inês was from Luanda). Apparently, after the death of a wife, the husband had the right to have sexual relations with other women in the household.

At school nobody asked her what was going on at home, "they didn't care – there I was with a bruised, swollen face and nobody took notice!" What 'saved her' was her little group of friends. They were four girls from Angola and Sao Tome who supported each other through what Inês and her friend Maria defined as serious abuse during their adolescence. In our 2 1/2 hour interview both broke down and cried, reliving their experiences – but still wanting to tell their story. In the last few years, Inês has discussed with her mother and father about why they "sent her

away". She can understand their argument that it was because of poverty, but she still cannot accept it. What she sees are lots of people who grew up in dire poverty, like the one her parents wanted to save her from, who today are doing great. In Inês's opinion, no children should have to live with other's than their biological parents. Her interest in children development and situation, both as a kindergarten teacher and an aspiring psychologist, is profoundly influenced by her own experience. However, her reflections also demonstrate how child migrant become aware of other forms of fostering practices, definitions of childhood, and different ways of constituting families. This is knowledge they achieve in the process of transgressing the consequences of geographical displacement through emplacement in new places and societies. Children and youth will by way of interaction and observation see how other people live and compare it to their own situation; and internalise other social constructions of childhood and ways of relating between parents/care-takers and children. Inês's story serves as a good example of how child care in migration contexts can be dynamic practices rather than unchallenged traditions.

Case 2

> *Milena came to Portugal in 1981, when she was six years old. Her family came to Portugal with the idea that they would stay there only for a period of two to three years. They had chosen to go abroad because of the Angolan civil war, and thought they would return to Luanda by the time the children had ended primary school. But as the situation in Angola kept deteriorating and become more politically intricate they stayed on. Today Milena is a Portuguese national (and Angolan?), but thinks that one day she will move back to Angola, although there are no concrete plans.*

Although I had some knowledge about her background before I met her, I felt somehow uncomfortable about pushing her to elaborate if these were her biologic or social parents: "But you came here with your aunt and uncle?", I asked tentatively. She explained that: "I have lived with my aunt and uncle since I was two and ended up calling them my parents and calling my parents uncle and aunt." Some might find

the question of whether this was biological or social kinship unimportant. However, I argue that in as much as this might be the case in the place of origin, it is important to ask transnational child migrants and their care-takers about this as the 'link' between them in turn often regulates access to rights and services where they settle down.

There reason this couple chose to migrate is the same as why Milena has lived with them all of her life: it is related to the family's history of political involvement in Angola (*um passado politico muito forte*). A family with roots in both São Tomé and Angola, they have experienced assassinations of relatives in both these countries. Milena's father was assassinated in 1977[1] and as a consequence Milena's mother asked her sister to take over the responsibility of Milena. She says she cannot remember to have lived with her biological mother. In addition her aunt and uncle has 3 children of their own, but Milena claims they have never treated her differently from their biological children. She also has two sisters from her mother's second marriage who are younger than her.

Milena defined both these events in Angola and her family's situation as different sources of instability that ultimately caused them to migrate. The disruption experienced by her parents (uncle and aunt) as a consequence of migration was related to having to start over with their studies. Upon arrival in Portugal, her aunt was in her fourth year of medical school, but had to start over with her studies as it was impossible for her to transfer (what about her uncle). This made the economic and familial situation difficult, as they both had to start over. However, as the children's grandmother was living with them, there was always someone to look after them, and who took responsibility for housework and preparing meals for everybody.

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[1] He was assassinated in the infamous "27 May 1977". After a coup attempt by a fraction of the ruling party MPLA (Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola), the party assassinated the leaders of the coup attempt, as well jailing and killing thousands of people who were thought to support the uprising in the following months. This took place only half a year after the Independence from the Portuguese, and the events following the attempted coup formalised the MPLA and its relationship to other political parties.

For Milena personally, migration was not experienced as a disruption per se. Neither was the fact she had lived most of her life apart from her biological mother perceived of as a tragedy. What for her constituted a problem during childhood and adolescence was rather that they did not really become integrated into Portuguese society as they lived in a neighbourhood with a relatively high number of Africans. Between the four siblings, Milena was the one with most curiosity towards *o mundo Português* or "the Portuguese world" as she calls it. African culture is for Milena very much closed and she describes how her trajectory in Portugal became different from her siblings in that she sought something outside the community she grew up in – something outside African culture. Her 'mother' was a role model in this respect, and Milena describes that: "My mother was a very modern African woman (*uma mulher africana muito moderna*)". She was less strict towards the children, and more open for them to participate in Portuguese society, than other African parents Milena knew about. In this way the family distinguished themselves in the social landscape Milena grew up in. Yet, they never lived in a housing estate or in social housing, and they represented the group of middle-class Angolan migrants in Lisbon. A teacher had once told her she and her family represented 'normality', but Milena's answer was that they were a minority in the African community as the people she grew up with had parents with a higher level of education than many other African migrants. She had the support she needed to get through secondary school and have later studied to become a psychologist. Many of the youth she meets through her work, whom she in lack of another term calls second generation, never had the feeling of belonging or coming from a place like she did: she grew up with the sense that she one day would return to a place she could remember coming from. They might have no sense of how Angola or Cape Verde are to live in, but parents, relatives, and teachers nevertheless might expect them to feel a connection to these places. Still, Milena described them as tending to 'cling on' to their African roots: "Last year I worked in a holiday camp, and I worked with youth between 15 and 17 years of age who had grown up here, but had never been to Porto [3-4 hours from Lisbon with train] I said to them: you'll not become less African by visiting the second city of Portugal!"

Then there were the holidays spent in Angola, three months every now and again that although they were holidays, felt rather like getting used to everyday life somewhere else. It was enough time for the children to understand the hardships of life in the place they had left behind, but the holidays were also times when the differences between relatives living abroad and those staying at home were sharply drawn. Underlying their interactions was a sense of treason by those who had left, Milena claimed. And because their relatives in Angola could not afford or were not able to go on a holiday to Portugal for other reasons, they were not able to see what their migrant relatives were living through.

Everybody in school and in the neighbourhood knew she 'really' was her parents niece (*sobrinha*). Yet, if fully accepted as her aunt's and uncle's daughter, the outside world still categorised her differently. This is were biological kinship is made relevant in her story, and has caused quite e lot of trouble and bureaucracy. To get access to all health services, her aunt and uncle had to formalise and legalise their relationship with Milena through adoption. She was already 15 years old when they achieved this. Formally having become their daughter did not end the bureaucracy of her 'projects of belonging'. Despite her curiosity she had never really wanted to become a Portuguese citizen. But when she grew older and started working, she realised it would be much better for her to have a Portuguese passport. In her experience it had been hard to get a job without one. It took her five years to achieve a residence permit or *cartão de residencia*, and another two years to receive her Portuguese citizenship. Today, Milena still claims her aim is to go back to Angola. Yet, it seems to me that she is somewhat ambivalent, when comparing her continued aspiration to move there with the story about the family holidays.

Conclusion: Transitions in Life and Narrations of Child Migration

Where, then, do I want this philosophical discussion about child migration, life-making projects, and narrated selves to take us? In as much as it is important to

understand the perspectives and voices of children, youth, care-takers and those working with children, it also crucial to bring research on child migration forward in new directions in epistemological terms. During this workshop there has been numerous discussions and comments on different categorisations, definitions and typologies related to child migration. I think these are very important discussions, as we do not only go out there and *find* data on social realities. Our research questions, concepts and methods shape our vision of those realities; and how we analyse our findings. The practices of researchers and policy-makers are practices of knowledge production with varying practical and symbolic implications for those we work with. This knowledge informs legislations, policies and aid recommendations on international, national and regional levels. When a longitudinal study is not possible, it is possible to create a 'similar effect' by taking into account the experiences and views of different generations, migration cohorts, and others who have an impact on child migrants' situation. Inês's and Milena's demonstrate in different ways that what at the time of them migrating was perceived of as being 'the best interest of the child', can in retrospect have been transformed by the experiences of children, parents or other care-takers.

I thus argue that transnational child migration presents us with challenges very different from grown-up migration as these are migrants who live through demanding changes in their life course in which they are expected to become responsible adults according to Angolan values, at the same time as they need to find a way to fit into Portuguese society. In hindsight these stories are attempts at transcending the gap between then and now, Angola and Portugal, and between childhood, youth and adulthood. Whereas migration offered parents and care-takers hopes for a better future for their children, the migrants themselves might have ended up living through experiences that made them disillusioned. In the process their relationships to parents and other relatives have been transformed. But instead of defining migration as a process of loss, I claim that in re-interpreting their experiences from the vantage point of the present, these former child migrants try to make sense of the world and their place within it (cf. Turton 2005) – in terms of

belonging, relatedness and the relationships they have with their families and the society they live in. In these narratives the notion of disruption is thus established through a focus on key events in the past that were related to or seen as the consequences of migration for the individual migrant. And because the hopes, expectations and experiences of different relatives vary, focusing on life stories and migration narratives is a useful tool to analysing the social dynamics within transnational families.

Akhil Gupta examines the "temporality of being" through a focus on migration, biography and reincarnation (2002:172). In anthropological explorations into the life of others, he writes, there is an 'inbuilt' conviction that there is "nothing universal about the specific stages into which a life is divided in the West" (ibid.:173). His purpose is to use this acceptance of the "ordinariness of diversity" (Higgins and Coen 2000) in anthropological conceptualisations of the life course, to rethink notions of life time and the individual. Similarly, my intention in this paper has been to analyse the relationship between experiences of migration and changes in the life course as different modes of temporality and mobilities. In this analytical exploration, I use narratives in which two former child migrants describe migration as a process of disruption to describe cultural distinct ways of 'imagining a life'. Here, I have been interested in how hindsight can somewhat dismantle and transform pre-migration intentions and notions of the ideal life.

Finally, looking at how migration and child protection regimes change over time in different places; the various dimensions structuring children's mobility as well as care practices and (former) child migrants' experiences of these; will enable us to re-visit and reinterpret different perceptions of 'the best interest of the child' as experienced 'on the ground'.