Play, create, transform: a pluriverse of children and childhoods from southern Mozambique

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Abstract: This article discusses the understanding of children as sociocultural beings and active agents in three communities in southern Mozambique as part of doctoral research from 2014–2018. This research study aimed to understand play as comprising meaningful activities for children and examine the possibilities for transformation and reinterpretation of possible worlds. An ethnographic framework was used drawing on methods such as participant observation, photographs, videos, informal conversations, and open interviews. Through the scenes observed, all of which foreground play, this paper addresses the relationship between children and waste materials and production of toys, their involvement with landscapes and the environment, and their role in the production of knowledge and data through the use of photography. As final considerations, the article reflects on the future of childhood studies and new decolonialised perspectives that consider children and their contexts, classes, ethnicities, and gender.

Keywords: Children, Mozambique, childhood studies, play, ethnography, social occupational therapy.

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Introduction

Adults do not always listen to children attentively and with interest, and this is often true in academia with a few exceptions in primarily sociological and anthropological literature. In studies addressing childhoods, children are considered as participatory individuals with rights. However, this acknowledgment is still expressed within the Eurocentric and normative framework, with most references about children's lives based on theories produced by adults.

In this sense, the term pluriverse appears as a reference to the plurality of childhoods, pointing to the coexistence of different worlds, or universes. The concept of pluriverse, developed by Canevacci (2005, 2013), argues that there is not a single and global view of (children's) cultures that can be summed up to a number, a code, or a recipe. In the Mozambican experience, there are different constructions of childhoods and possibilities of being a child and playing is one of the activities that enables this dynamic.

This paper, therefore, discusses the production of children from, and through, shared experiences in which play is presented as a creative activity and as child creation, expression and knowledge that coexist in everyday life, producing diverse poetic senses and thoughts about being a child in Mozambique. This manuscript is based on my doctoral research (Pastore 2020). Based on the understanding of children as sociocultural beings and active agents in productions of the world around them and in dialogue with childhood studies, this paper aims to understand play and the relationships that precede, mediate, and follow these productions, as meaningful activities of children and possibilities of transformations and rereading of worlds and imaginative horizons (Crapanzano 2005).

To understand the complexity with which cultures and societies approach and deal with children, as well as with their childhoods, it is necessary to look beyond the obvious. The obvious, in contexts of studies addressing African children, occurs through the bias of lack, negativities, diseases, poverty and conflicts. In short, they demonstrate a bias on extremely socially vulnerable and/or marginalised children (USAID 2002; Unicef 2006). The denial of differences and diversities, both in contexts and relations conducted and marked by colonialism and wars, seems to remain today, whether in politics or in the ways of thinking about and dealing with children in Mozambique. This is evidenced by the approaches adopted by NGOs that work with children, or even by UNICEF, in which a single reference and childhood is used, emphatically that of a white, European, or North American child (Abebe & Ofuso-Kusi 2016; Twum-Danso Imoh 2016; Alanamu *et al.* 2018), as the standard to judge all childhoods.

In specific fields of study, such as anthropology, sociology, education and the arts, children have been addressed as social actors and agents of their own

processes. In this context it seems inoperative and, somehow, inhumane not to listen to them.

By observing the Mozambican children, their creations and the way in which they develop relationships with others and construct their own identity, it becomes impossible not to consider their socio-historical-cultural existence (Fanon 1980; Cabral 2007).

In this context, it seems pertinent to refer to a plurality of childhoods, pointing to the coexistence of different worlds or universes. This was done from a long-standing, multi-sided ethnographic study, conducted between 2014 and 2018, based on references from the literature that involve dialogically learned experiences and understandings. By understanding that there are multiple dimensions to the lives of Mozambican children and that playing is one of their main activities, this study narrates, discusses, and illustrates the experiences of children who are connected in, and through, play in southern Mozambique. This study was not developed from the perspective of nurturing care or a global development plan, but from that of social occupational therapy and child anthropology, which understands this multiplicity of children from sociocultural contexts.

By taking children as producers of culture and active collaborators, the dialogic dynamic was considered not only with them, but also with their family and community. Thus, the relationship established in the study sought horizontality of power, anchored in Paulo Freire's theory (Freire 1987; 1989) which underscores the importance of dialoguing with others to understand the world.

This framework of knowledge construction within horizontal relations between the people involved in it (Freire 1987) favours an environment for fundamental propositions arising from concerns of 'existing in the world'. Put it another way, this framework encourages researchers to focus on 'making history with the child' (Freire 1989: 13). Adopting such an approach requires researchers to view children as agents of transforming processes and as constructors of historical processes that underpin the society in which they live.

Recent studies have argued that the ways of understanding and portraying childhood have never been static (Abebe & Ofuso-Kusi 2016; Twum-Danso Imoh 2016); the research on which this article was based also sought a dynamic set of practices, beliefs and times on which play, as a meaningful activity for children, was the motive of multiple senses and pluriverses. The focus was on children aged 5 to 17 years from three communities in southern Mozambique—Matola A, Mabotine, and Nhandlovo. The definition of a child used in the study was based on the participants' self-declarations in informal conversations or interviews—that they considered themselves to be children according to the relevant legislation enforced in that country.

Literature review

In a simplified way, studies conducted with children in Africa are still restricted, focused on standardising and characterising childhood through a logic of inclusion or exclusion. As these studies use, as a reference point, European and northern childhoods, they demonstrate the extent to which African childhoods do not fit into this mould. As a result, such children end up being treated, studied, and seen according to the logic of 'lack' or as victims of problems such as wars, malnutrition, HIV/AIDS, and child labour (Abebe & Ofuso-Kusi 2016; Twum-Danso Imoh 2016; Alanamu *et al.* 2018).

It is noteworthy that a literature review on the issue of childhood in Mozambique, especially in Portuguese-language literature, showed that there is still little specific production of research and documents that place the child as the central focus of the study. Exceptions are some official Mozambican documents, such as reports from UNICEF-Mozambique, the National Institute of Statistics of Mozambique, or even, the National Action Plan for Children 2006–2010 (Governo de Moçambique 2006) and the National Action Plan for Orphaned and Vulnerable Children (Cardoso 2010). The predominant concern is linked to social problems such as illness, shelter, social vulnerability, adoption, street situation, among others (Schutte 1980; Jonker & Swanzen 2007; Sarkym 2008; Mezmur 2009; van As & Millar 2012; Wittenberg 2013; Hendricks 2014). None of these studies were, however, concerned about understanding childhood in its multiple dimensions in the country and did not dialogue directly with the children.

Another issue raised is the difficulty in accessing most texts at paid databases, which limits access to studies that involve the aforementioned themes, either because of the difficulty in the quality of online access, the amounts charged to access some articles, or even the processes imposed to access them in public libraries, involving time-consuming bureaucracy. The grouping of studies into a category called 'African studies' restricts and reduces the diversity in research, in the disciplines and in the references used, in a relationship that is also unequal to other studies, which are not grouped into 'European studies' or 'North American studies', but are separated by disciplines such as 'literature' or 'anthropology'. In addition, there is confusion when searching for African children in search filters, where most studies show Black, Afro-descendant or Latin American children in 'one single topic'.

In relation to play and children, this theme is still a challenge in existing studies about childhoods in Mozambique. A book entitled *Play, Toys and Games: Ways of Being Children in Portuguese-speaking Countries*, by Catarina Tomás and Natália Fernandes (2014), has a chapter on the play of children in the outskirts of Maputo, the capital city of Mozambique, by Elena Colonna and Rui António. Added to this is a doctoral research study by Carlota Tembe, which is currently ongoing, on playing from an intergenerational perspective. Understanding that play is not yet one of the

central themes of studies produced about Mozambican childhoods, this research also sought to explore this aspect of children's lives.

In the case of research with children in Mozambique (Colonna & António 2014), the pluralities that exist in childhood experiences are overlooked in two ways: both by the posture of non-dialogue with subjects (but with objects of study) and by disqualifications derived from the fact that they are children from non-hegemonic countries (Marchi 2007). This one-dimensional focus on Mozambican childhoods also persists, within the scope of the research, guidelines of coloniality with hierarchisation in the theoretical evaluation, disqualifying or ignoring the academic production of southern countries. Thus, the bulk of the interest on Mozambican childhoods is centred around exploitation and rights violations. It is difficult to turn the focus on to issues of power and, above all, on to trying to understand cultural logics and rationales that are foreign to Eurocentric cultures.

By understanding coloniality as 'a global logic of dehumanisation that is able to exist even in the absence of formal colonies' (Maldonado-Torres 2019: 36) that defines racial difference as a factor of exclusion and, thus, a propagator of racism, research is, even today, discriminatory and colonising, in the sense that some knowledge is valued and highlighted to the detriment of others. Walsh *et al.* (2018: 3) advocate that coloniality 'has been built as a political, epistemological and pedagogical force', establishing the possibilities or not of critical thinking from those who have become subordinated by European capitalist modernity.

In this study, the theoretical references found and selected try to encompass authors from Southern countries and themes that address the children who inhabit, transform, and produce cultures and knowledge also in these countries, in a logic different from the conventional, in an approach seeking to foster the decoloniality of research and challenge hegemonic thinking. Decoloniality is thought of in this work as a political and intellectual position that is inspired by a question of 'struggle against the exogenous structures of Western-modern domination/power, and also against the internal or Western structures that we carry within us and that constitute us' (Grosfoguel 2019: 67–9) by finding in, with, and for, children the ways of existing in the world through play.

Thinking about Mozambican children in their contexts based on their ways of playing and, thus, producing knowledge and culture is to decolonise thought, theories, and ways of acting with them, producing knowledge and practices in dialogue with authors from the South, mainly those from the African continent, of which ethnography and associated methods were fundamental in this research.

This study aims to illuminate plurality of children's lives in Mozambique and demonstrate that play, although not present in most research studies, is part of the everyday lives of children in the South region of the country, and is, in fact, one of their significant daily activities.

Methodology

An ethnographic study that allowed me to meet children and observe their productions and experiences around play was conducted between 2014 and 2018 with the aim of rethinking the ways children and their realities are integrated into different practices in diverse contexts, including in urban, peri-urban and rural areas. This research also allowed me to understand that these children's actions are fundamental in their singular, collective and community processes and that local knowledge, along with cultural and social knowledge, permeate their ways of life and creations. Through ethnography, it was possible to conceive play and the construction of knowledge as some of the means of perpetuation and cultural production in which children are not only active agents, but social, conscious individuals who create, through play, ways of being, transforming, transcribing, and translating the environment they inhabit.

The presence of the researcher, adult and foreign, is a point that also deserves to be highlighted. There is no possible way a study can be conducted free from power relations and interferences. However, there are ways of doing research that initiate dialogue with children in which the researcher's role is that of an atypical adult—albeit still an adult.

Although the objective here is not to expand on these questions, I feel it is important to emphasise that doing ethnographic research, with fieldwork and associated techniques, requires a reflexivity from those who conduct it. The researcher should be careful not to fall into a game of innocence and superiority or assume that the researcher and researched are equal. The place in the field and in relationships should always be negotiated, rethought, and based on reflections and relationships.

Study design

The ethnographic study was designed to occur in 2014, 2017 and 2018. In each of these years, the field research took about six months. The study was conducted in the children's homes, schools, churches, streets, and neighbourhoods as a whole in the communities of Matola A, Mabotine, and Nhandlovo. The community of Mabotine is located in Maputo, the country's capital; Matola A is located in the city of Matola, Maputo province, and Nhandlovo is a rural village located in the Inhambane province. These places were chosen because of the links that the researcher had with these children and their families from a previous study carried out in 2012. At the same time, participatory techniques, and methodologies, such as photography, videos, drawings, participant observation, informal conversations and open and semi-structured interviews, were used with the children.

Participants

Children aged 2 to 17 years participated in the research study; however, only those aged 5 to 17 years were included in this paper. In each community, the children chose to participate in the study, and they were investigators and assisted with the production and collection of data together with the researcher as peer researchers. The children's involvement was voluntary, and I chose to include those who asked to be part of the research. Others were referred by the children themselves or ended up participating indirectly, in moments of play observed as part of this study. All relationships were formed through bonding and previous contacts.

Ethical considerations

Ethical procedures were guided by the ethics code of the Brazilian Association of Anthropology (ABA). As there is no ethical committee for research in human sciences in Mozambique, it was necessary to search for other ways to be ethically aligned with the existing issues in the country. In 2017, the sociology department at the Eduardo Mondlane University, together with UNICEF-Mozambique, created a short course in 'Ethics in Social Research' whose main objective was 'to train academics and professionals working in the field of social research to ethically manage the entire process, from study design to publication and dissemination of results',[1] and this course is offered to the present day.

Informed Consent Forms (ICF) were obtained verbally, as most the children and their guardians did not read or write Portuguese. Although Mozambique is a country in which Portuguese is the official language, most of its population speaks various indigenous languages, such as *Changana* and *Matsua*. Because of this, when Portuguese could not be used as a common language between the researcher and participants, some of the children who spoke both Portuguese and the other languages adopted the role of translator.

Following a first conversation with the child participants, the researcher spoke to their parents or guardians and obtained their acceptance prior to the study being undertaken.

Likewise, the images included in this study were taken by the children themselves, and had their and their guardians' permission to be collected and used for academic purposes.

In each research space, consent to be there and then to carry out the study was given in a personal conversation. Local and regional authorities and hierarchies were consulted, and gave their approval for the study to be undertaken in their contexts.

[1] This can be better verified on the social media of UNICEF-Mozambique: https://twitter.com/UNICEF_Moz

The relationship of authorisation with the participating children, as well as with their families and other people involved, was based on dialogue: I informed them about the study, we discussed their opinions about it, and then I sensed whether they were willing to participate. This process was respected from beginning to end. At the end of the project, a photo album was given to each child. This photo album was built together with them, and they chose the images they wanted to print and keep. It was a way of using part of the data as an acknowledgment and validating the experience exchanges that occurred during the process.

Data collection and analysis

Ethnography integrates this work not only as a methodology, but also as a theoretical and fundamental part of data production, of its analysis, its constant reflexivity and theoretical production (Peirano, 2014). Along with ethnography, other methods were employed to seek a greater understanding of play: informal conversations, semi-structured interviews, photography, drawing, and video.

Informal conversations occurred along with participant observation, which involved the children's significant spaces, such as school, home, streets, neighbourhoods, and other environments, for instance the river in the rural case. The semi-structured interviews also occurred during moments of play as well as other occasions. Everything was recorded through field notes.

Photography was the most used technique, followed by participant observation and data recording in field notebooks (nine in total). From a total of 5298 photographs, most of them taken by the children themselves of the moments of play or what they considered important in their daily lives, 13 photos were included in this study. The children and their guardians authorised the use of this material. Data analysis was carried out by themes involving play on several fronts: with the use of disposable materials, in environmental spaces, and in photographs of play situations.

Results and discussion

During the collection and analysis of data, many children presented play as the main category used to maintain their position as children and defended this activity. In the search for the ways children played and their understandings, the researcher was presented with the scenes and narratives transcribed below.

It is important to take into account cultural aspects when analysing the results of a research study conducted with children and childhoods. To think about children and childhood in Mozambique is also to think about the meanings of the experiences that

permeate their day-to-day lives which includes beliefs, customs, values, symbols, and meanings (Borba 2007; Barros & Mariano 2019; Carvalho 2005).

Some narratives are presented to illustrate part of the study results and experiences with children, based on observations and experiences, as well as some photographs selected as part of the production of data and about play.

Play and its interfaces: intertwining imagination, freedom, and creativity

Sildolfe, 13 years old, liked drawing. One day he drew a picture of children and said he would paint them with the colours of the rainbow. When I asked him why, he said: 'ah, we are happy! When we play, we stay alive. Don't you feel joy in your body, Aunt Marina? We can be all the colours we want' (Field Notes no. 4, 2018). In the children's speech as well as in the understanding of adults, and even in the laws and programmes, play appears as the main aspect of children lives, both in terms of the right to exercise citizenship and the duty of the family and society (República de Moçambique, 1992). In this way it coexists with countless other aspects that constitute what it is to be a child in Mozambique, which encompasses multiple forms and plural possibilities.

When children play, in a mix of doing and creating, they colour and add sensations to their experiences, producing many forms of being, constructing, (re)inventing, and imagining. As there are different ways of understanding what children are in each of the contexts, there are different ways to understand and concretise play: in the construction of toys, relationships between material and immaterial beings, humans, and non-humans, in everyday images and scenes, etc.

There were several occasions when the children interacted with the environment, transformed the landscape into scenes, and created things by gathering and using discarded materials. One of these moments occurred on one of the field research days in Matola A in mid-2014. Some boys were talking while sitting in a backyard. In the shade of the only tree, Carlos (12 years old) moved his hands and the others followed them with their eyes. In his hands, black plastic bags were being joined and taking shape—'I'm making a *chingufu*',[2] he said.

The younger boys concentrated on what was being done but did not participate directly in the construction. One of the older boys decided that he would also take the spotlight and, in a quick movement, climbed the tree, drawing all the attention to him by using his body to create dancing shadows. Carlos did not take his eyes off the plastic bags, which were forming an increasing circle; the rest of the boys divided their attention between the two actors.

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[2] *Chingufu* is a ball made with plastic and fabric.

Figures 1 and 2. Making a *chingufu*. Source: researcher's personal archive (2014).[3]

1　'Pass me the string', said Carlos, while Délcio (14 years old), sitting in front, gave it to him.
2　'You have to tie it', said Carlos, reaffirming his movements out loud.

There, playing was a moment beyond what was happening in the present: it involved a whole previous logic, of individual and collective construction, so that it could occur.

The coloured strings collected from discarded material were taking shape in what was being built. The torn plastic bags and their pieces collected from the ground, wrapped with the worn strings from something that had previously been useful, took the new form of a solid sphere. The created ball rolled on the ground while the boys tried dribbling and passing it. Football with *chingufu*, a ball made in a few minutes, was now being played there (Field Notes no. 2, 2014).

The construction of the ball, from materials that had been discarded and recycled was part of the everyday lives of children and their playful moments, both in urban and rural areas. In Nhandlovo, for example, the children looked for discarded plastics and tied them with strings they had made with tree fibres, transforming the available raw materials into key pieces for the construction of toys, such as a ball, which in

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[3] It is worth mentioning that, although the photos are from the researcher's personal archive, it was the children themselves who photographed the images of this text. The use was authorised by both the children and their guardians.

[4] In *Matsua* (another Mozambican language) the word for ball is *puri*.

Figures 3 and 4. Remote control and toy car. Source: researcher's personal archive (2017).

that context, was known by another name: *puri*.[4] Making toys was part of the play moments.

When referring to a Mozambican childhood, or to African childhoods, in general, what we have is the image of a stolen childhood in which play does not permeate everyday life or, when it is part of it, it usually occurs through the lack of toys, opportunities, and places. The construction of the *chingufu* represents the possibility of transforming the world into something that can be played with.

Other materials were used in their creations: remains of rubber bands, coloured plastics, remains of fabric, pieces of glass found along the way, stones, *caniços*,[5] rice bags, old tyres, plastic bottles, broomsticks, etc. The children built strollers, kites and seesaws, invented clothing, made fashion shows and created scenarios. They also sang and produced instruments, performed, and played. Music and laughter were shared, allowing the children to form and express a collective identity.

[5] *Caniços* are one of the main house building materials in Mozambique. *Caniços* are the reeds of some plant species, such as bamboo (Carvalhor 2019).

Adults hardly interrupted their playing moments; rather, the children themselves initiated, directed, and decided on the form in which they played when they had some activity or went to school. They were the ones who decided what, and how, to play, the toys they would create, and the materials. The songs varied, but generally they were songs sung in their mother tongue, rap by Mozambican singers, or Brazilian songs.

In their ways of creating, children bring the experience in which improvisatory practice unfolds, according to Ingold (2012: 27), not as connections or relations between one thing and another, but rather along the lines on which 'things continually come into being'. The construction of toys and the relationship that the children were creating with those moments were intrinsically associated with playing. Further, the ways they were building and sharing notions of values, meanings, gestures, feelings, exchanges, knowledge, and social norms as they played were linked to the culture in which they were inserted and the contexts they inhabit.

There must be enthusiasm in every adventure children experience. As Pereira (2013: 32) states: 'without enthusiasm, there is no life'. Further it was evident that it was in these experiences that children developed strengths and ideas for their creations and productions. In 2017, on one of the field research days, Félix (16 years old), Manelito (11), Omilton (12), and Cris (10) were gathered in the backyard of Grandma Clemência's house, in Matola, Maputo. There were several materials spread on the ground: a bottom of an old speaker (cork), old wires, rotating parts, batteries, glass, a small screwdriver, bolt nuts, rubber bands, and threaded parts. Asked about what would come out of all those things, they replied: 'we're going to assemble a remote-control car'.

Using a notebook as a ruler, the boys made the necessary marks to fit the pieces on the cork part, through observation with the naked eye; the exchanges of information, articulated in *Xichangana* (a Bantu language), reinforced the ways in which they believed that each piece would work. Félix drilled and rotated the pieces while Manelito watched. Together, the four boys were conducting the construction process. Félix was the leader, while Manelito was more of an observer. They said they had learned to assemble the car at home, with the help of Daimo (13 years old). The boys drilled the cork, turned one of the pieces, threaded and unthreaded, finished and sanded the old, weathered, rusted rotating parts. Soon after, they dispersed, and each went to an activity: school, cooking, playing football, etc. The next day, they returned to the assembly. Divided between the construction of the remote-control car and the preparation of the tea they would drink, the boys took turns heating the water and tightening the pieces, sharing knowledge even in silence. Félix sanded and beat on the pieces. One of the main pieces was the dynamo, which they called '*dina*'.

1   'Can you see this? It's a *dina ...*', Félix said.
2   '*Dina*?'

3 '*Yah*. From the DVD player ...'. He stopped, scratched his head, and then added:—'It looks like I'm forgetting something ...'

Félix stood up, walked outside, and returned with two wheels from an old toy car and some caps from plastic bottles which would be used as the wheels of the remote-control car. He walked back to the yard, picked up a long, thin piece of iron and broke it. With a stone, he sanded the iron piece, making it as smooth as possible. He took the caps, pierced them in the middle and fitted in a piece of thin metal, enjoying their rotating movement.

4 'Now we have a wheel!' He exclaimed.

Manelito joined him and they started mounting the parts in the car.

5 'This will make the car wheels turn'—said Félix, while Manelito held a circular, jagged piece that would be placed at the car base. Félix spoke about the pieces to Manelito at the same time that he spoke to himself, reaffirming the specificities of each one of them and the ways of mounting them. The car construction process was long. The boys would come, sit, and talk. They would choose parts, positions, and ways of building. With the base mounted, they tested the wires, battery, and *dina*. This time, Manelito and Omilton were the protagonists. With one end of the wire touching the battery and the other the dynamo, the boys tested it until the *dina* spun, producing electrical current for its operation. With the *dina* working, the boys joined the battery on one side and the rubber band on the other, which was connected to a small white plastic gear that would make the wheels turn. The car base was then ready and functioning. Daimo arrived soon after and was surprised by the evolution of the car. The boys said 'the car is his', and started a dialogue of their ideas:

6 'I saw this remote control at secondary school; it's a science thing, I've learned how to make this remote control. I don't remember what is made of, but I made it using a bottle. But this one was made using a slipper'—said Daimo, thus bringing in a new element: he learnt how to make the remote control at school during a science class.

7 'Do you like building things?'

8 'I like to build toys', he said. 'Playing is child fun. Because when you are a child, you have a lot of fun, you know other games, so that you won't have any difficulties in education when you grow up and ... And ... That's it. Playing, you learn not to spoil the happiness of others. And learn to create other play'.

In his comments, Daimo brings reflections that go beyond building, and that go to a place of understanding play as formation of identity, values, knowledge, and exchanges that will also continue through adulthood. According to the researcher,

Figure 5. *Machamba*. Source: researcher's personal archive (2018).

Ghandhy Piorsky (2015), playing children also become playing adults who cooperate with children and with others (Ensinando 2015). Daimo gathers a notion of solidarity coexisting in the act of creating toys and the role of knowledge acquired also in school life as a source of inspiration for the construction of play.

The children stated that 'everything can become a toy', and it was in playing that the meetings occurred: between children, spaces, and materials. In places that lack many things, improvisation is a way of inhabiting the world and being connected to it.

This construction involves several aspects: skills in physics, even without knowledge of science as a subject and of its application; teaching-learning dynamics based on experiences and on horizontal relationships and knowledge sharing; intergenerational relationships, and sharing of experiences. There is also an empirical creativity along with the desire to transform and create in order to play, understanding that play goes beyond the logically and rationally established truths. To observe and understand the children's play and relationships beyond what is lacking is to enable a world of artefacts and experiences. An example can be taken from William Kamkwamba's 2009 book, *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind*. William was a 13-year-old boy who lived the village of Wimbe, Malawi, when he designed and built a windmill that activated a pump to collect water from the soil that was used to irrigate the plantations of that village, which had been suffering the consequences of a drought for five years. This true story provides the frame through which we can think about the application of children's knowledge and intelligence and, on our side, to think about how we mediate the possibility of this existence (Menino 2019).

These constructions—of the windmill by William and of the remote-control car by Daimo, Manelito, Omilton, and Félix—encompassed knowledge acquired from

a need, driven by specific demands, but which created life from observation and creativity. When children make, create, interpret, and translate acquired knowledge and desires, they begin to reach spheres of knowledge that go beyond school teachings and that permeate and transcend life experience (Ensinando 2015; Menino 2019). The moment of creation was also a moment of encounter and relationship—relationship between children, peers, intergenerational, and between the children, the objects, and the materials available. The construction of toys also allowed the relationship between children of different ages and the continuity of care. In addition to material exchanges, there were immaterial ones. For example, contact with the wind and knowledge about the coming winds were key factors in flying a kite. The exchanges and relationships that the children created, maintained, and reinvented were constantly there.

It was common to find children playing free in open spaces in communities and villages, between houses, in backyards, on the streets, in isolated places and in those where there were people. There were places that only children knew; adults either did not know how to get to them or it seemed that the access was not allowed. Knowing places, especially those where they could play, was one of the children's skills.

I realised that there were cultural movements in these interactions that surpassed the understanding of culture as something focused only on human behaviour, as stated by Pires (2010) citing Ingold (2000). Rather, there was a developmental relationship through the histories of relationships with other living and non-living beings, from the environment they inhabit and what surrounds them, against an idea of child socialisation in which knowledge is imposed on children, but of doing while being.

Lenna Bahule (2019, informal conversation) defends the relationship between natural environment and the formation of Mozambicans, including children. According to her, nature 'concerns everything that involves us: religion, the ways we are brought up, identity. And in the ways of play, and also how it occurs'. Play never happened in isolation from where it was inserted: it occurred in the spaces where it gained the stage. Play moved creativity, construction, and scenarios.

In their relations with landscapes, the children found references through play, such as relationships with historical, social, geographical, cultural and expression processes that were only possible based on their experiences. Clemência (Félix's grandmother, 63 years old), when recalling a memory from her childhood, related the children's play in Nhandlovo to cultivating the land: 'Children are excited to come to the *machamba*.[6] They begin to dig, and dig, dig. They learn to like the land, the corncobs, and the seeds. They see the plants growing and get excited. Their hearts become filled with good things. To be on the *machamba* you have to have a heart' (Field Notes no. 3, 2018). The children, although not responding directly, reported that 'being on the farm is taking care of what we are going to eat with affection'.

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[6] The term in Xichangana for plantation.

Figure 6. The stream and its waters. Source: researcher's personal archive (2018).

The reality of many children in the region was portrayed in that speech: from an early age, they went to the fields with their parents or grandparents; learning about nature/the land/planting was part of being involved in work in the fields with family and being recognised as participants in daily chores. For adults, it was through playing that children learned different rules and values; for the children, it was through playing that they had fun. As a researcher, I understand a completeness in both functions of play.

The relationship with the *machamba* involved issues of other orders as well: relations with non-living and spiritual beings. Before entering the fields, the children and adults asked for permission and protection from the landowners, ancestors, in a relationship of respect for the past and present. Nature and spirituality coexisting in the children's experiences, in communion and in a way of building values, mediated by play.

It was in nature, in spaces along streams and/or rivers, that much of the play children engaged in emerged: the children built boats and raced them, could move freely—come and go—in these spaces. Such freedom was not always allowed in other spaces. Their bodies would become other things, and they bathed, fought, performed tasks, and played. The contact with nature, especially in Nhandlovo, allowed these children to have experiences different from those of other children who lived in urban areas, where competitiveness and individualities seemed to gain more life than solidarity and conviviality.

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[7] *Landi* is a term that refers the word *mulandi*, which means 'black' in Xichangana. It refers to the tradition of the people of that territory.

Figures 7, 8 and 9. Various forms of play. Source: researcher's personal archive (2014–2018).

In addition to the *machambas*, all other places had streams and/or rivers. In Nhandlovo, many things happened in the river and its banks: people met and washed clothes, animals drank water, children played. Grandpa Bento (72 years old) said: 'the river is the meeting place, of waters and winds. It is in the river that life happens. Haven't you ever heard that?' (Field Notes no. 1, 2018).

The land was as respected as the water, which also led to respect for the spirits and people who had been there in past times: 'you must respect it', said the boys. This demonstration of care for the ancestors and the lands expressed by the children is also an understanding of harmony and of the relationships between diverse existing forces that transform everyday life, and play is permeated by them. Respect for ancestors, as a cultural tradition, was reinvented there by the children from what was available and accessible to them, while maintaining a present socio-historical process. Children demonstrated this in playing and respecting spaces and traditions.

In the book *Ombella* (2014), the Angolan writer Ondjaki brings this relationship between living and non-living beings and the ways in which, when upset, Ombella, the Goddess of rain, wept and became saddened. According to her degree of emotion, she could create mild rain or intense storms.

The children referred to the river in Matsua as *Iatxongwine*. Playing in the river was then more than the river itself: it was everything that involved coming and going, the paths, the relationships established by the children, the exchanges and relations with spaces and the environment, with ancestral beings, food, references, and language. Grandma Clemência said this was a '*Landi* tradition':[7]

1   *Landi* tradition means to respect the land and the spirits that live there and who cared and still care for it.
2   The spiritual question and the coexistence with a world of non-living beings are very present in these communities, and children understand and incorporate this spiritual coexistence in different ways (Honwana, 2002).

Understanding Grandma Clemencia's comments and the children's relationship with nature and its surroundings was to understand that the *Landi* tradition allows exchanges between children and adults in the same logic and with the same care and respect. It is a *Landi* tradition to follow beliefs and believe in tales, without losing the innocence and coherence that exist in adverse relationships and those with otherness and coexistence of worlds, in an understanding that universes and landscapes are more than what the rational, Eurocentric logic explains. It is a *Landi* tradition to respect nature, the animals, and the land and to teach children about all the responsibility, without taking away from them the richness and delicacy of being children, playing, and running. It is being human in this world that is gradually teaching us the opposite. (Field Notes no. 2, 2018).

Playing in, and with, the environment, the way the boys did in Nhandlovo, was a state of being in communion with different natural elements such as water, land, air, trees, and fruits, living and non-living beings, visible and not visible. What if, when playing, children were leaving their footprints in the world? A world permeated by the environment and the living and non-living beings with whom these children had relationships. Those children would build connections through skills and perceptions in the spaces where the experience and the referential were only possible through the

experience of a body in that space, through those sensations (Ondjaki 2008; Field Notes no. 1, 2017; Bahule 2019).

From the flows and counter flows, the children would transform what surrounded them. Twum-Danso Imoh (2016) discusses the notions of childhood within micro- and macro-social spaces. Play is what also allows us to enter and look at the universes and aspects that these children seek when they bring notions related to food, utensils, the roles assumed, and the materials used and processed into their play. For those children, playing and transforming, respecting the elements and beings, meant also being connected to the realities that permeated them on several fronts.

Many were the transformations that those children made, as were the elements and landscapes with which they played: water, earth, fire, animals, fruits, flowers, plants, wind... The environment presents its potency in the places where the research occurred, in a very close interaction with play and children, and when the environment encounters the imagination provided by the natural elements that surround the children, it enhances its potency and generates knowledge that, when shared, flourishes in the play and knowledge that children share in their everyday lives, care, and production of senses and meanings.

This might then be the moment to remake the images of these children from and in landscapes, contextualised in current temporalities and spaces in which their images can also add to their play, their relationships with nature and as forms of cultural production, perpetuation and transformation. To recreate new imaginaries and research data in which the images of children playing, in the 21st century, are part of Mozambican childhoods, of their activities and formation as people, in an attempt to create new stories, memories, and presently contextualised realities.

Final considerations

The greatest challenge of this research study was to understand, albeit indirectly, the distance and margins (borders, porous contact spaces) between normative notions of childhood and children's actual lives in Mozambique. We cannot universalise childhood or reduce it to a single way of being. There is need to meet the children in their real spaces, contextualise their experiences in their stories and ways of life, so that we can look at them and do research that is with, about, and for, them. This is because, in most studies, understandings and portrayals of an ideal childhood fail to consider the sociocultural contexts, colonisation and children's own lives.

These considerations thus constituted some of the main points of reflection in the construction and interpretation of data, as well as in the process of writing and rereading: A crucial reflection in the collection and interpretation of data and later analysis, was that the routine marginalisation of children from African countries, in which it is assumed

childhood is not experienced, is incorrect. Rather, childhood is an importance space between worlds of experience. Researchers must explore perceptions of how children play, transform, and are transformed, develop intelligence and create collective identities.

When children create actions and ways of doing, based on what they know or learn from their experiences, they exercise their participation and citizenship as social individuals and create ways to share their voices, points of view, and social and collective life not only through dialogue, but also through rhythms, steps, and gestures. When children create dynamics and take the researcher to the spaces where play occurs or can occur, they not only inform the studies, but become active and actively creative participants in their own narratives, integrating and building data, theories, and ways of thinking and conducting research that are aligned with their ways of life (Myers, 2010).

There is need to create spaces so that the theories that address childhood studies in Africa encompass the issues of playing, transforming, creating, weaving, and reliving. There is a need to make room for the imagination and creativity of children as well of researchers. There is need to build other ways of going beyond the margins and making crossings that focus mainly on play, on understanding children's capacities for both action and abstraction, on the making of their imagination and make-believe, and on their realisation. Ecology, recycling, different languages, rhythms, gestures, gender difference and how girls and boys play, ancestry, and many other aspects of play can be interesting themes for future childhood studies and paths. Perhaps research should be more like play, from southern Mozambique and beyond.

Acknowledgements

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