Growing Up and Going Abroad: How Ghanaian Children Imagine Transnational Migration

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by Catı Coe

Paper for “Through Children’s Eyes: Transnationalism Reconsidered”

by Katy Gardner and Kanwal Mand

for the Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies

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Abstract
Migration scholars should pay attention to migration as seen through children’s eyes for at least two reasons. For one, children’s perspectives help us understand whether children are being socialized into their community’s culture of migration, a culture which shapes migration patterns and flows. Secondly, given that some children migrate and some children are left behind by migrant parents or relatives, children’s imaginings of whether they as children ought to migrate affects where the responsibility and costs for their care will be located, between family members, countries, and states. This paper examines how children aged 10-18 in a town in southern Ghana imagine life abroad, conceptualize the timing of migration in their lifecourse, and articulate their goals in migrating as a case study for exploring these larger issues.

Keywords: children, culture of migration, socialization, gender, life course
Growing Up and Going Abroad: 
How Ghanaian Children Imagine Transnational Migration

by Cati Coe

A twelve-year-old boy in Ghana told me that he wanted to grow up before he migrated abroad. How and why do his aspirations and sense of the future matter? This paper argues that looking through children’s eyes helps bring certain aspects of transnational migration into sharper focus. In particular, children’s perspectives help us understand how they are (or are not) socialized into a culture of migration, or discourses about mobility which contribute to the patterns and flows of people’s movement in migrant-sending places, including the movement of children themselves. Furthermore, because children’s physical location can affect who is providing for their current and future well-being, whether within families or through state services, children’s migration, and their expectations of mobility, have implications for how material support for children is distributed around the world.

Historically, studies of migration did not look at migrants as individuals, except through their characteristics such as skills and national origin (e.g., Castles and Kosack 1973, Portes and Walton 1981; for a review see Massey, Arango, Hugo, Kouadouci, Pellegrino and Taylor 1993). In part, this blindness was due to a focus on the demographic flows of migrants and concerns on the part of governments over controlling migration. However, since the 1990s, there has been a growing awareness of the role that migrants’ networks and imaginations play in fueling and sustaining migration (e.g., Appadurai 1990; Glick Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton 1992). This awareness has created interest in understanding migrants’ worlds and perspectives, prior to and after migration, which has led to an appreciation of the variation in migrants’ experience. In particular, gendered analyses of migration have shown how women’s migration opens up
possibilities for the transformation of gendered norms, as women’s work in the host country gives them economic opportunities more comparable to men’s and as the legal system of their host country, however imperfectly, grants them greater support in cases of abuse and divorce (e.g., Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994, Pessar and Mahler 2003, Pessar 1999; for examples of these phenomena among African migrants, see Holtzman 2000 and Manuh 1998). Research in Central America and the Philippines has also shown that women’s migration can also affect their children more profoundly than does men’s migration, because women’s migration more often conflicts with gendered notions of what a “good mother” is, whereas the relatives of migrant men are more easily able to reconcile their migration with ideologies of fatherhood (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997, Parreñas 2001, Pribilsky 2007, Schmalzbauer 2004, Smith 2004). The analysis of migration as gendered—that, for instance, men and women have different migration experiences and their migration has different effects on others—helps generate a finer-grained understanding of contemporary transnationalism.

Children’s experiences of migration require similar analysis to that of male and female migrants. Just as we have a category of analysis like gender, so too do we need to examine age, because people’s position in the lifecourse affects their possibilities and perspectives (Elder, Johnson, and Crasnoe 2003; Thorne 2004). This paper examines how Ghanaian children imagine their mobility and physical location in their lifecourse. Do children in Ghana hope to go abroad? In particular, if children want to go abroad, when do they hope to do so—as children or as working adults? These questions lead us to two distinct issues. One concerns the extent to which children and adolescents adopt an adult culture of migration. The second concerns how the timing of migration in a person’s lifecourse affects the global distribution of resources necessary for the care of children. Both issues, examined in turn below, highlight the importance
of paying attention to children’s views and experiences in understanding contemporary patterns of transnational migration.

*Children and a Culture of Migration*

Numerous studies in migrant-sending locations have focused on how a culture of migration generates expectations for the future, social networks which facilitate migration, and discourses which shape people’s migrations (Massey, Arango, Hugo, Kouaouci, Pellegrino and Taylor 1993; Smith 2006). As members of communities, children come in contact with values and ideologies through their interactions with others, but studies of socialization show how children do not wholeheartedly adopt the values and ideologies of their communities. Socialization requires not just parental or media communication about a value, but also internationalization of those values. The degree to which a value or expectation present in the community is internalized varies from person to person, ranging from familiarity with the value to a deep emotional attachment to that value, as “the individual must also find the cultural value personally significant to take in through psychological operations” (Rae-Espinoza 2011: 117, Spiro 1997). Socialization thus does not mean that children necessarily mirror the values of adults, but rather that, of those values, discourses, and perspectives with which they come in contact through their interactions, they take up those which they find personally meaningful, through conscious and unconscious processes.

Further complicating matters, children may have a socially appropriate cultural repertoire that differs from that of adults by virtue of their social position and role in those interactions, such as the kind of speech that is directed at them or the kind of speech they are expected to produce, as children (Schieffelin 1990). Just as men and women may have different
understandings of the meaning and composition of family, based on their interactions in their respective social roles (Wolf 1967), children too may have different, even oppositional, perspectives and norms than adults because of their age-based social position. In areas where adolescents mainly migrate, the culture of migration can be maintained through adolescent social networks, like other forms of adolescent peer culture, with adults’ tacit consent (Empez Vidal 2011). As children age, and their social position changes, discontinuities in socialization may mean that they take on the cultural repertoire of adults (Spindler 1997) or adolescents may bring their adolescent values with them as they become adults, generating cultural change through cohort turnover (Alwin and McCammon 2003). Children’s imaginings and expectations of migration, including their own migration, are thus critical to the reproduction and transformation of a culture of migration in a migrant-sending community.

*The Global Distribution of Care for Children*

The second way that children’s expectations of migration are significant is that their physical location affects the flows of material resources that enable them to grow, and through their growth, for families, households, and society at large to be reproduced. Childhood as a stage of the lifecourse is associated, among other things, with greater dependency, in which children require the support and nurturance of adults and older peers for their growth and sustenance (although some children in the world support themselves) and increasingly, with a time of preparation for adulthood through schooling or other forms of training (although many children do not go to school). Across the world, households and governments allocate considerable energy and resources to raising and supporting children in the provision of their daily needs, schooling, and healthcare.
In Ghana, children’s lives are supported by the in-flow of resources and energy from others, what Parker Shipton (2007) terms “entrustment,” in which being cared for creates a responsibility or debt for the care-receiver to reciprocate in future. “Entrustment implies an obligation, but not necessarily an obligation to repay like with like, as a loan might imply. Whether an entrustment or transfer is returnable in kind or in radically different form—be it economic, political, symbolic, or some mixture of these—is a matter of cultural context and strategy” (Shipton 2007: 11). While children can begin to reciprocate—my Ghanaian child informants suggested they could do so by being obedient and doing household chores quickly and without fuss—the bulk of the transfer of energy and resources to others will happen as they themselves become adults and those others become elderly. Such reciprocal relations are central to intergenerational webs of responsibility and the social reproduction of families. Precisely because reciprocity operates differently from market forces, families can be sustained by reciprocal relations in hard economic times or through traumatic events such as a death or illness.

These forms of reciprocity function as a safety net and opportunity structure for families and individuals when other social resources to mitigate risks are not available. Cindi Katz (2001) has explored how “vagabond capitalism” has reduced the support of state, capital, and civil society for the care of children, thus placing more of the burden for social reproduction onto the reciprocal relations which sustain households and families. Migration regimes have been crucial in the displacement of the costs of social reproduction to families and households. To use a historical example, colonial policies in Africa, particularly in southern Africa, constrained the mobility of labor, restricting Africans’ residence to selected areas or homelands. These state policies worked alongside those of commercial enterprises in the cities and mines which did not provide adequately for the retirement and disablement of their workers. In combination, these
policies resulted in the migration of young and middle-aged men, while their dependents—their relatives who were elderly, sick, disabled, and children—remained behind in the rural areas, providing for their sustenance through agricultural activities (Mamdani 1996, Meillassoux 1981, Schapera 1947). While the men were absent from the homelands for much of their adult years, they stayed on the reserves when they were children, elderly, or sick, and returned annually or every few years to visit their relations there. Writing about those long-distance relationships, the anthropologist Claude Meillassoux says, “Consequently, preservation of the relations with the village and the familial community is an absolute requirement for the wage-earners, and so is the maintenance of the traditional mode of production as the only one capable of ensuring survival” (1972: 103). Such reliance on reciprocities between families and households as well as on agriculture—what Meillassoux terms the traditional form of production—was necessitated by the lack of social welfare and a wage that would allow for social reproduction in urban areas, as well as colonial legal mechanisms such as pass laws which managed rural-to-urban migration streams.

Contemporary migration policies by First World countries similarly facilitate the shifting of the burden of social reproduction to households and families, as well as to institutions beyond their national borders (Katz 2001, Meillassoux 1981). The economies of First World countries require immigrant labor, including for care work (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002), but many limit the number of children or other dependents who are admitted into the country, through a variety of means. Some countries such as the Gulf States or Hong Kong have guestworker programs which, by definition, give multiyear contracts to able-bodied, healthy adults in the prime of their working lives, ages 18-45, and prevent the migration of workers’ dependents (Constable 2007, Gamburd 2000). Countries like the United States in which most legal migrants
are admitted through family reunification channels rather than work-based routes allow children and the elderly as the dependents of legal migrants to enter, but the length of time (5-20 years) which it takes to process their papers effectively reduce the number of years a child will be taken care of in the United States rather than their country of origin.

Like the South African migrants described above, transnational migrants may rely on their networks with those in their hometowns to enable the reproduction of their families (Schmaltzbauer 2004). The difficulties of raising children in the United States, the demands of work, and the low rate of pay cause some Ghanaians to shift the care of their children back to their home countries for a period of time. For instance, Dr. Gyikua Plange Rhule (2005), a pediatrician in Ghana, described what she called “the posted baby syndrome,” where babies are sent back from abroad to be cared for by their grandmothers in Ghana, because of maternal difficulties in combining work and childcare in First World countries. Other Ghanaian parents I have interviewed in the United States want to raise their children in Ghana towards the end of secondary school and bring them to join them in the United States only when the adolescents can begin working (Coe 2008). Transnationalism is a means by which international migrants can ensure social reproduction and the care of children by tapping into labor markets abroad while simultaneously being reliant on the family labor, state services, or cheaper private services and schooling in their home country.

Although I have considered socialization and the care of children separately, these issues are connected. Socialization into particular discourses of migration which sustain and support transnational ties can have major ramifications on who and which social structures bear the costs for the care of children. As sociologists have argued, socialization plays a key role in the complex process by which social, economic, and geographical inequalities are reproduced, in
which both personal agency and structures such as legal systems and economic and political hierarchies all play a role (for example Bourdieu 1977, Willis 1981). One key mechanism by which socialization can lead to the reproduction of inequalities is in the structuring of children’s aspirations of their future life to fit expected conditions of possibility (MacLeod 1995). I would argue, therefore, that children’s imaginings of their lifecourse will have an impact on which countries bear the costs of training a future American and European workforce, and the degree of these young people’s acceptance of the structural conditions associated with migration and inequality. I turn now to examining these broader issues through the specific case of Ghanaian international migration.

**Migration in Ghana**

Migration has long characterized West African social life, and migrants have historically been valued as sources of new knowledge, skills, and resources. Not only does Ghana serve as a destination for labor migrants from the Sahelian countries in the West African region or for refugees from conflicts further to the west in Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Cote d’Ivoire, but Ghanaians have also sought opportunities far afield through travel, whether within Ghana or elsewhere in Africa in Nigeria, Togo, or Libya, but also abroad, in Europe, the Caribbean, the Middle East, and North America (Caldwell 1969, Manuh 2004, Peil 1995). Ghanaians migrate primarily for work, although women are also likely to migrate because of their husbands’ migration. Those who work for the government in healthcare, education, agriculture, or administration are transferred from post to post in Ghana, as are religious personnel. Many women are traders, and they travel weekly to buy and carry goods. Ghanaians also travel for education, attending boarding secondary schools, vocational and technical institutes, teaching
training colleges, and universities or becoming apprentices to seamstresses, hairdressers, mechanics, and commercial drivers in small and large towns. They travel to large urban areas to participate in the commercial opportunities available there or they travel to work on farmland in western Ghana. Transnational migration is an extension of the common phenomenon of migration and travel within Ghana and throughout West Africa.

Transnational migration has been a known and valued phenomenon in Ghana since the colonial era, both for work elsewhere in West Africa and education in the metropole, processes that continued after independence. Ghanaian students in Britain left behind their children in the care of relatives and friends for the few years it took them to complete their studies (Goody and Groothius 1982). Transnational migration to other areas in the subregion increased as a result of the economically difficult and politically unstable period of the 1970s and 1980s and structural adjustment programs by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund during the 1980s (Peil 1995; Twum-Baah, Nabila, and Aryee 1985). Structural adjustment programs weakened the state’s ability to provide needed services, enhanced the export-oriented segments of the economy which did not necessarily create many options for economic mobility, and resulted in a decline in living standards for middle-class professionals and civil servants, thus generating desires among the educated and skilled middle-class to migrate (see Parreñas 2005 and Sassen 1998 for a discussion of this process in other countries). International and regional migration increased during the 1980s as Ghanaians traveled to Nigeria and Libya, but now every country in the world that is economically better off is a potential destination—from the United Kingdom and Europe to Australia, South Africa, Israel, Japan, the Caribbean, and the United States (Twum-Baah, Nabila, and Aryee 1995). Statistician K. A. Twum-Baah (2005) estimates that
with a population of 21 million Ghanaians resident in Ghana, another 1.5 million are outside the country, but the available statistics on which this estimate is based are not entirely reliable.

Both internal and international migration are associated with a stage in the lifecourse in Ghana. In particular, it is assumed that young men, and increasingly young women, migrate (Bartle 1981, Bryden 1979, Peil 1995). Returning to one’s hometown is also associated with a stage in the lifecourse: middle-aged women in particular return home when their own mothers (defined broadly) need care or pass away, or when a marriage ends or economic opportunities dry up. Both men and women come back to their hometowns following retirement from formal employment at the age of sixty (van der Geest 1998). Thus, migrants tend to be between the ages of twenty and forty-five, at the height of their physical strength and productive and reproductive trajectories.

As a result, children in Ghanaian families are affected by migration, even when they may not migrate themselves. Parents may leave behind children in the care of other relatives in the hometown: many women who migrate work hard and travel often, making care of small children difficult, and urban environments offer cramped and unsanitary housing (Bartle 1978, Bryden 1979). Those children with family members, parents, and siblings elsewhere in Ghana or in neighboring Togo may circulate amongst households: perhaps living with a grandmother in the hometown and going to school there, but visited by a mother or father on weekends or spending long vacations with other relatives or parents in the place where they have migrated (see also Bryden 1979, Kaye 1962, Meier 2000). They may go to live with any of these relatives (including parents) for some years, sometimes in more urban areas where schools are considered to be of higher quality. These patterns of movement are more difficult for the children of international migrants. The legal restrictions on travel, unstable employment, and the high cost
of living in the country of migration make raising children there prohibitive. As a result, the children of international migrants are more likely to remain behind with the close relatives of migrants, such as aunts, grandmothers, uncles, than their internal migrant counterparts. Parents and children wait many years until they have obtained visas or the children have grown up a little, such that they do not require child care or can begin working, before the child joins the parent or parents abroad.

These patterns of migration are affected by place-based inequalities. Migrants, like traders, seek to use the differences in one environment over another: in one place, food and housing may be plentiful and cheap; in another, there is employment but the cost of supporting a household are high. As discussed above, migrants manage the higher costs of urban life (particularly of housing and food) by leaving their children back at home with their relatives. Thus, the costs of caring for the next generation are subsidized by those in the more rural areas, who are somewhat supported by remittances coming back from migrants in the urban areas (Caldwell 1969, Van Hear 2002).

This paper’s analysis is based on Ghanaian children’s own understandings of transnational migration. For Ghanaian children, international migrants are, on the one hand, family members who are simply far away and international migration is simply an extension of internal migration, with similar obligations on migrants regarding care of their families. On the other hand, however, children also viewed places as having a hierarchy in terms of the material resources they had available, and in this aspect, countries were arranged hierarchically in terms of how much one might expect a migrant family member to provide, with countries in the West African sub-region (where most Ghanaians migrate internationally) and southern Africa seen as less beneficial than Europe or the US. Children conceived of the world as differentiated by the
level of material resources present, but connected through transnational linkages between people, particularly through the flow of material resources necessary for social reproduction and expected through relations of entrustment.

Interviews, drawings, and focus group discussions with children aged 10-18 reveal that children consistently expressed the desire to go abroad, primarily because “abroad” was associated with work that would pay well. Children viewed “abroad” as similar to towns and cities in Ghana with the availability of beautiful things, cars, piped water, electrical fixtures, and schools with resources, and just as many children preferred the town to the village, so too many children wanted to go abroad. However, as regards the timing of that migration, half the children wanted to “finish their education” in Ghana, at least to a certain level, before going abroad to work. The other half wanted to go abroad immediately, if they got the chance, to continue their schooling. This paper examines how children’s perceptions of their life course intersect with place-based global economic inequalities.

**Methods and Setting**

I completed a household survey in the town of Akropong, a district capital of about 9,000 people, located in the Eastern Region of Ghana (Ghana Statistical Service 2002) in June-September 2008. Rapidly becoming an outer suburb of the capital city Accra, Akropong has a teacher-training college, a small campus of the new Presbyterian university, and two secondary schools. Akropong is connected to nearby urban and rural areas: many residents of the town have relatives living in villages elsewhere in the Eastern Region and have lived in such villages in the past. The business of the town, education, has attracted migrants to the town from many parts of Ghana, but young people seek greener pastures in the larger cities of southern Ghana. Nearly all
households have a relative who is abroad (perhaps with his or her children and spouse) and many young people would like to join them there, in the hopes of a better future. I have done ethnographic research in this town since 1997: two years of active work during six trips ranging from six weeks to one year in length.

Aiming for ninety interviews with caregivers of children who had a parent abroad or a parent elsewhere in Ghana, I and a local research assistant, a young man named Kweku Aryeh, visited 220 houses across all five neighborhoods in the town of approximately 1712 houses (not necessarily households), based on a satellite map of the town, available from the District Assembly, through a process of random number generation. Because children with international migrant parents represented only five per cent of the children in local schools (based on a school survey I conducted in 2006 among 1182 children aged six to fourteen), we did have to ask the people in households we encountered whether they knew any child in the neighborhood who had a parent abroad to obtain our goal of thirty such children. Ultimately, this effort resulted in interviews with ninety-three caregivers and with eighty of the children they were looking after. The children were between the ages of eight and twenty-two years. The children under the age of eight in those households were not interviewed. The interviews collected adult and child personal experiences regarding family life and migration; the random nature of the survey ensured that these experiences were elicited from a range of people living in Akropong, particularly in terms of social class and origin within Ghana. While all the children were living in Akropong at the time, not all of them considered Akropong their hometown. Most of the children were Akan and from somewhere in the Eastern Region; one was Ga, one was Ewe, and one was Frafra.
45 of these same children also came to focus group discussions which were organized in their neighborhoods. This paper draws only on seven focus group discussions with a total of 25 children at which we elicited their discourses about migration, child circulation in different households, and differences between life in a village, a town, and abroad. Although the discourses the children produced during the discussions varied, they seem to reflect what they thought we wanted to hear, particularly as we probed and asked follow-up questions such as “why?”. In doing so, they drew from the repertoire of appropriate discourses available to them from their previous experiences. Thus, the degree of internalization of these discourses—the degree to which they were emotionally involved in these values and ideas—is difficult to determine, but the discussions do reveal the first degree of internalization according to the gradation described by Spiro (1997): familiarity or acquaintance with a particular value or norm. All of the conversations with children were conducted in Twi: in the case of Akropong, this often meant a combination of different dialects of Twi (Asante, Akyem, and Akuapem), with sometimes a word or two thrown in Ga or English, as was common of everyday conversations in Akropong. Although I was present for the focus group discussions and occasionally asked a question, the discussions were primarily facilitated either by Margaret Rose Tettey, a former teacher who worked for the district education office, or Joe Banson, a pharmacist and church elder in the town, both of whom were members of the research team. The responses described below come both from children who have close relatives who are transnational migrants and from those who do not.
Children’s Imaginings of Aburokyiri or Abroad

“Aburokyiri,” or what I am translating as “abroad,” came up regularly in my conversations with Ghanaians, but I was not entirely sure what it referenced: did it mean First World countries only or was it a broader designation? In discussions with children about “Aburokyiri,” children generally agreed that it signaled the world outside Africa—including the Middle East, India, and China—although it was most often associated with “London” and “America,” the most favored destinations (see also Van Hear 2002). A few also associated it with other parts of Africa, such as South Africa or Nigeria, or even with Kotoka international airport in Accra, Ghana, because one had to enter the airport to travel to Aburokyiri.

Because of the ways that Akropong children have circulated through the homes of different relatives and non-relatives, many children had experienced a range of urban and rural environments in southern Ghana. These places were stratified in their minds, in terms of development and physical infrastructure, opportunity, and status. These town-resident children associated villages with absent teachers and poor schooling, poor physical infrastructure such as mudbrick rather than cement buildings, lack of electricity and running water, long distances for errands on which children are sent, lack of transportation, and food which is readily available but which they did not consider prestigious—the yams, cassava, and plantains that are grown in small farms and gardens. As a result, most of the children in the focus group discussions would rather live in town than in a village.

Similarly, abroad was conceived of as primarily an urban environment, although children acknowledged that villages were also there; they named India and China, when asked. Although Akropong is considered a town in comparison to rural areas in Ghana, children considered it a village in comparison to Aburokyiri. Aburokyiri is generally associated with physical
infrastructure and technology, similar to the way that towns are in Ghana: abroad, children mentioned that you can find washing machines, cars, nice clothes, beautiful buildings, and telephone poles. As one 13-year-old girl, from the northern part of Ghana who worked for a cooked food seller with a small kiosk on a main street said:

*There are many things there*

In response to a question about why he considered Aburokyiri a town, one 11-year-old boy who lived with his grandfather said:

Kwame

*Because there are villages and there is abroad. People abroad have many more things than a village has.*

Cati

*What kind of things wouldn’t you see in a village?*

Kwame

*There are some villages where you can’t take a car to go straight to town. But you can take a car within a town. Abroad, someone wants to go here to there and can take a car. There is also electricity there, but in some villages, there is none.*

One 15-year-old girl said about Aburokyiri:

*There is like, they say it is like Ghana here. Also, there is civilization and money, so if you go and work, you get money, and the money is worth more than our money here.*

A 13-year-old boy also commented:

*I’d like to add that the buildings abroad are beautiful and they decorate them.*

Children expressed a desire to visit: to see what life was like abroad and observe these pretty things for themselves.

However, abroad or Aburokyiri was primarily associated with work, as the following quotes suggest:
If you work, you will get money [whereas in Ghana, the implication is that you will work but the pay will be terrible]—a 13-year-old girl

In future, if I go and work there, I will get money to look after my mother or grandparents—a 16-year-old girl

The reason I would like to go abroad is that there is work and they pay your salary quickly so you can come home as a rich person—a 13-year-old boy

They say that if you go there, you work and bring money, it turns into a lot of money here. People will also respect you here—a 15-year-old girl

Their association of Aburokyiri with work and money was very much connected to the experience of international migrants from Akropong and elsewhere in southern Ghana, who in the current time period primarily go for work, staying for decades and sending home remittances, rather than during the late colonial and early independence eras, when Ghanaians went for a few years for study and returned home to higher salaries and more prestigious positions (Goody and Groothius 1982, Peil 1995).

Given that abroad is associated with labor migration, do children expect or want to migrate abroad as adults or as children?

To Wait or Not Wait to Go Abroad?

24 children responded to the question posed of whether they would like to go abroad, and if so, when. One, an 18-year-old boy, said he did not want to go abroad at all. The rest (23 children) said that they would like to go abroad: 11 children preferred to wait, while 12 said that they would go immediately if given the opportunity. The first group who wanted to wait was
comprised of six girls and five boys, aged ten to 16, with an average age of 13 years, while the second group of 12 who wanted to go immediately was composed of nine boys and three girls, aged ten to 14, with an average age of 11 years.

The reason why half the children wanted to wait to migrate varied, but many said that they wanted to finish school in Ghana before going abroad. Because Aborokyiri was a place to work to earn money, migration was linked to adulthood in their minds. One ten-year-old girl whose father was abroad said she wanted to wait to finish secondary school before she went abroad. When asked to explain, she responded:

*Because right now I am young.*

Or a 15-year-old girl said,

*Right now, we haven’t grown up to be able to go, but if we finish school, we can actually work.*

Schooling was associated with child status, and work with adult status and abroad, although some children wanted to continue their schooling abroad. A 12-year-old boy explained:

*I want to grow up, to study and grow up. If I finish school, I want to continue my education there and get good work to do. And I would see what it is like there.*

Not all considered finishing schooling important as a sign of adult status and the ability to work. One boy was interested in completing his education in Ghana for the skills it would give him. He explained he would like to finish school in Ghana, because it would help him improve his English language skills, which he thought he would need when he went abroad.

However, one 11-year-old girl living with her grandmother provided a different reason for waiting to go abroad.

Adwoa  *As for me, I want to complete college first.*
Cati  You want to complete college first?

Joe  [Adwoa] wants to complete all her schooling first.

Cati  Why do you want to complete college before going?

Adwoa  Because I want to help my grandmother a little, for what she has done for me. If I didn’t help her and went, she will tell me that she looked after me to the point where I am now, and if I went anywhere at all, I should finish school and look after her a little before I go.

Thus, unlike the others, Adwoa thought she should delay emigration until after she had had a chance to reciprocally fulfill her obligations of care to her grandmother who took care of her.

While many of the children were concerned about helping those who had helped them as a child, Adwoa was the only one who mentioned delaying migration to devote care to her grandmother; the others imagined themselves as being able to combine migration with reciprocal care by saying who they would send remittances to in future, thus linking the fulfillment of these obligations to their migration.

While ten of the 11 children who wanted to wait talked about finishing school before going, one 11-year-old boy gave a different answer, related to his vulnerability as a child to people who might try to harm him. He wanted to wait until he had grown up to go abroad because he did not want to be killed for medicine or witchcraft (juju) by those interested in quick riches.

Those who wanted to wait to migrate seemed the most aligned to what their adult relatives desired. Individual interviews with children whose parents were abroad and with their parents indicated that children were often told to wait until they finished school (junior secondary school or secondary school) or to grow up before they could join their parents abroad.
Parents living in the US also talked to me about their plans to bring over their children in the last few years of secondary school or after completing secondary school, because their children were then old enough to not require supervision, to begin working, and to help substantially with housework and any younger siblings. College was also perceived to be much easier to enter in the US than in Ghana, although the growth of private universities in the last decade in Ghana has opened up opportunities for those with the financial wherewithal, mainly those with relatives abroad who are able to afford the high tuition fees.

Those children who said they wanted to go abroad immediately or tomorrow were in two groups. There were four children in this group who talked about abroad as a place to go to school, but they also mentioned work in their statements. For instance, one 12-year-old boy thought he would go to school abroad and then work there:

_ I want to visit there and as for me, I will go to school [there] and grow up and get money and bring it to my mother and return, and look for work again._

A fifth 12-year-old boy felt that one might not get good work in Ghana and so one should go abroad. Thus, even among this group, abroad was associated with work although they also linked it to the opportunity to continue their education, drawing on primarily older norms of migration when going abroad was associated with a prestigious educational degree.

Another four wanted to go abroad to simply see what it was like. For them, abroad was an object of curiosity or tourism. One 11-year-old boy expressed it this way:

Kwame _As soon as I get a small chance to go, I will be off._

Joe _Why?_

Kwame _Because I have heard a little bit about that place, and I want to go see what it is like._
A 13-year-old girl also said:

*I want to go see what it is like there, like their schools and how they dress and their houses.*

Another ten-year-old boy was aware that it was hard to go abroad, and he argued that one should take the chance when one had the opportunity, because it might not come again.

*Um, if I get a chance to go abroad, you have to go, because if you don’t, the person who wants to take you there will leave you behind. So you will be grown up before you see that person again.*

Another ten-year-old boy wanted to go abroad because he associated it with expensive food from abroad—tea, bread, and salad—although an older girl in the same group complained that such food was not very tasty, despite its high status.

These children’s statements reflect the internal mobility of people in Ghana: they can come and go as they please. When they migrate internationally, people would like the same fluidity of household arrangements which maximizes childcare, educational opportunities, and work schedules. Children would like to visit back and forth, as they are able to do with uncles and aunts, mothers and fathers who live in Ghana or in Togo. They would like to go see what abroad looks like and whether what they have heard is accurate. They would like to be able to return easily to Ghana to give their mothers or other relatives cash, but then be able to return abroad to continue to earn money. In all their statements, they emphasized the transnational connections and mobility between abroad and Ghana: they saw themselves as traveling back and forth and sending money to and helping their loved ones in Ghana.
However, the difficulty in getting visas and the cost of airline travel pose much higher restrictions than travel within Ghana or the subregion of West Africa. As one mother abandoned by a husband abroad said,

*It is like a barrier has come between you, so you won’t see him again at all.*

At least one of the children was very aware of the restrictions on travel abroad and how this might affect transnational relationships: this fear structured his desire to go immediately, given the difficulties of being able to migrate at all, whether legally or illegally, and to maintain contact with a transnational migrant.

**Conclusions**

Children’s comments replicated much of adult discourse about migration and the patterns of migration in southern Ghana but also showed variation in their socialization. Many associated Aburokyiri with work, the primary reason Ghanaians currently travel and live abroad. Most also wanted to go abroad, for the wealth and respect they expect such travel will garner them. However, children varied in their thoughts about the timing of that migration, with half wanting to finish school in Ghana or grow up before migrating, and half wanting to go immediately, to continue their education abroad or to experience and see for themselves all that they had heard and seen through the media. The differences in responses varied somewhat by gender and age. While the number of children do not allow for any conclusions of statistical significance, these variations are suggestive.

Interestingly, the “wait” group was older than the “I’ll go now” group: on average, two years older. The desire to wait to grow up was much more aligned to dominant adult expectations: that one should finish school in Ghana and go abroad when one was ready to work,
although one might combine higher education and work as a young adult, despite the practical and financial difficulties of doing so. However, some of the younger group who wanted to go immediately also based their desire on their knowledge of abroad: in particular, the restrictive immigration policies or the temporary conjunction of a migrant’s available resources with the necessary paperwork which meant that one might only get a single opportunity to go. Four of this latter, “go-now” group did, however, seem unaware of these restrictions, hoping to travel abroad to satisfy their curiosity as they might travel to an interesting locale within Ghana. It is possible that as these four children grow, they too may revise their aspirations into expectations that they will “wait until after school,” just as an 11-year-old boy in the US may dream of a professional athletic career but revise his dreams by the age of 15 as he realizes how unlikely it is (MacLeod 1995). However, it is also possible that they are generating new expectations for policies in which children can be mobile across international borders, in a way that they are within Ghana, visiting family and relations on school holidays.

It is also striking that there are more boys than girls who would like to go immediately and that more girls than boys would like to wait to migrate. Twice as many girls wanted to wait as wanted to travel abroad immediately; and the reverse is almost true for the boys (the numbers were five and nine respectively for the boys). This may reflect gendered patterns in Ghanaian international migration today: while both men and women are expected to work, and many migrate within Ghana to seek opportunities in the cities, international migrants are still primarily men. Although the rate of women migrating independently has increased in Ghana (Manuh 2006), my data from Akropong shows that when women from the town migrate internationally, they often migrate in conjunction with marriage to a migrant man. Thus, girls’ and boys’ differently patterned answers may indicate that girls are less likely to migrate than boys, or
simply that they plan to migrate later in life. We will remember that a girl said she wanted to wait to migrate until after she has been able to help her grandmother reciprocally, as her grandmother had helped her. Most migrants and their relatives consider remittances to be an appropriate way for migrants to fulfill their reciprocal obligations to relatives who have supported and nurtured them. However, although both men and women are expected to support their relatives financially, women have traditionally returned home to do the daily work of caring for elderly or sick relatives while men are freer to send money back to support their loved one and his or her caregiver (Apt 1993, van der Geest 1998). Thus, it is possible that women’s care giving role, not as a mother as studies of women’s migration from Southeast Asian and Latin American countries would suggest, but as a daughter or grand-daughter, hinder their migration.

Still, waiting to take care of an elderly relation was a decidedly minority opinion among the girls, and some girls did not want to delay their own migration.

The 18-year-old boy who did not want to go abroad confounds the argument so far about gender, although not the one about age. He lived in a household with an unrelated elderly couple four of whose children were abroad in Britain and the US. He therefore had a much more realistic view of abroad than did some other children and adults in the town. For instance, he knew that finding work abroad could be difficult without contacts and that one lacked freedom because one could be deported or detained by the police. He felt that one could live well in Ghana and did not need to go abroad to struggle so hard for such little reward. I met other young people who had once desired to go abroad but had now given up, including the twenty-two-year-old son of a woman who had migrated to Germany many years before.

These findings suggest that children’s high hopes regarding the promise of migration may be leveled as they age, causing them to re-adjust their initial desires to go immediately. What we
may be observing is children’s socialization into a culture of migration, prompting boys to migrate and causing girls to be more cautious about doing so. The older they are, the more likely they are to wait until adulthood. What we do not know from this study is how these children absorbed these attitudes and expectations, how they became aware of the patterns of migration and internalized them, and how these expectations of their future are affected by the structural constraints of economic conditions and other countries’ legal regimes (Empez 2011). In other words, while the variations in their expressed desires are suggestive, we do not know how all of them came to have these attitudes (and nor may they know, to the extent that such processes are not fully conscious).

Will Ghana be the home of children and the elderly while an adult labor force travels abroad to work for wages that cannot sustain dependents in that country? If these children’s statements are any guide to their future actions, that half the children expected to migrate as an adult worker suggests that Ghana will bear some of the costs of reproducing the next generation of the workforce but will not reap the benefits of that “investment” as the children migrate abroad when they too are able-bodied, like the health care workers who are trained at state expense in Africa but seek employment in other countries once they are certified (Manuh 2006).

As this material indicates, research on children highlights the temporal dimension of social life: how people change over time and how an individual’s life course relates to larger social and cultural changes. Southern Ghanaian children’s dreams about their own international migration have implications for children’s socialization into particular discourses and practices of migration present in their communities and for key issues of global inequality, particularly concerning who will bear the costs and responsibilities of social reproduction and the care of dependent, non-working people.
Acknowledgments

I am grateful to all those who were willing to be interviewed for this project as well as the rest of my research team: Kweku Aryeh, who assisted with the individual interviews; Joe Banson and Margaret Rose Tettey who co-facilitated the children’s focus group discussions; and Rogers Krobea Asante, Joe Banson, Bright Nkrumah, and Emmanuel Amo Ofori who completed the arduous task of transcription. All provided advice at crucial points. The research was financially supported by the National Science Foundation (Cultural Anthropology program), CODESRIA, and the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research.

Endnotes

1. All names of children are pseudonyms.

Works Cited


