

# Introduction

## GROWING UP IN HANG'OMBE VILLAGE

I stay quiet and listen closely whenever the adults speak.

—Brenda, 9-year-old girl

A good person talks, but not too much. There is some talk that is good and some that isn't. Nowadays, few people know the difference between the two.

—Minivah, 38-year-old mother of five

It was an afternoon in early January 2009 during the peak of the rainy season in Hang'ombe Village, a 40 km<sup>2</sup> cluster of rural homesteads among the Plateau Tonga of Zambia's Southern Province. Four children – 9-year-old Disteria, her brother Munsanje (7), their cousin Richwel (9) and their young aunt Frida (10) – walked along one of the paths traversing the area, each carrying a full water bucket on their head back to their mutual home of extended family members, referred to as the Mweemba *munzi* or homestead. The rains had been plenty this season, and so water could be found in the relative proximity of most homes. Frida had recently joined the homestead to assist her older sister Jackie – mother of Disteria and Munsanje and the paternal auntie of Richwel – as neither of Frida's parents had been able to take care of her after divorcing and remarrying. Richwel had been adopted by his aunt and uncle after his mother's death in 2002, and so he, Munsanje, Disteria and her twin brother Daala had grown up close together. Besides their household chores, all the children attended the local school, Mbabala Basic School, placed in the township about twenty minutes' walk from their home. Most Saturdays, the children

visited the local Seventh Day Adventist church with their families, singing, preaching the gospel and joining the lively gatherings succeeding most meetings. This afternoon, like many others, the four children had gone to fetch water together, escaping the homestead for an hour while joking, singing, arguing, exchanging ideas and chatting about current events. As they walked back, Disteria invited them all to start singing together:<sup>1</sup>

1. Disteria: Tiye katuyabwiimba amutukke tweenda. [Singing] Hallelujah, hallelujah ...

*Let's start off and sing as we move. [Singing] Hallelujah, hallelujah ...*

2. All the children [singing]: Alumbwe mwami wesu, alike akacinge bantu basyomeka. Hallelujah, hallelujah alike akacinge bantu basyomeka.

*Praise our God, He alone shall take the people who are faithful. Praise God, praise God, He alone shall take the people who are faithful.*

3. Disteria: Wasika a chorus, mpoonya Frida, 'Hallelujah, hallelujah alumbwe mwami wesu'. Tiye 'Hallelujah, hallelujah alumbwe mwami wesu'.

*When we get to the chorus, you Frida should sing 'Hallelujah, hallelujah praise our God'. Let's sing 'Hallelujah, hallelujah praise our God'.*

4. Frida [singing with Disteria]: Hallelujah.

*Hallelujah.*

5. All the children [singing]: Hallelujah, hallelujah alumbwe mwami wesu, alike akacinge bantu basyomeka.

*Hallelujah, hallelujah praise our God, He alone shall take His faithful people.*

[The singing ends. The children walk quietly for a while.]

6. Munsanje [to Disteria]: Mbomutisike buyo sena nkusamba?

*Immediately when you get home, will you take a bath?*

7. Disteria: Ndaakusika nkuli tila-tila.

*Immediately when I get home, I'll take a quick bath.*

8. Frida: Ndaakusika nkuli kupa buyo.

*When I get home, I [too] will take a quick bath.*

9. Disteria: Mbonditikanjile buyo nkulicumba-cumba mweendo, nkusamba kumutwe nkuli kupa amubili.  
*Immediately when I get in the bathroom, I'll quickly wash my legs, wash my head and, in the end, the whole body.*
10. Frida [acknowledging]: liyi.  
Yes.
11. Disteria [to Frida]: Mulitila buyo? Kwamana mwanana mafwuta?  
*Do you just pour water on your body? After that [you] apply lotion?*
- [Frida does not respond.]
12. Munsanje: Mebo inga nsesambi, alatontola meenda badaala.  
*I don't usually bathe, the water is very cold.*
13. Frida [to Munsanje, angrily]: Ndiyookwaamba! Ncocinunka dooti eci, ndiyookwaamba buya!  
*I'll report you! That's the reason you smell dirty, I'll definitely report you!*
14. Munsanje [angrily]: Ukaambe, ndiyookupwaya!  
*[If] you report me, I'll beat you!*
15. Disteria [to Munsanje]: Ukamupwaye kuli? Ncotasambi. Ndiyooabaambila ba auntie.  
*Why do you want to beat her? You don't bathe. I'll tell auntie.*
16. Richwel: Bayi besu balauma batasambi.  
*Our teacher beats those who don't bathe.*
17. Munsanje: Swebo tabaumi besu badaala. Ede inga taakwe ciindi cakusamba.  
*Our teacher doesn't beat. But I don't have time to bathe.*

This book explores the social lifeworlds of about twenty 6–12-year-old children living and growing up in the early twenty-first century in Hang'ombe Village, a rural chiTonga-speaking community in southern Zambia. Through nine months of linguistic-ethnographic fieldwork among four extended families in 2008–2009, along with a brief revisit in 2010, I have pursued the social experiences, practices and orientations displayed and expressed by these children in their everyday interactions, particularly among their siblings and kin. As in many parts of rural Africa (Nsamenang 2008), Hang'ombe children

grow up in close-knit, multigenerational subsistence farm-based homesteads to which they are expected to contribute from around the age of five, gradually taking on more demanding household chores and responsibilities. Unlike in highly industrialised societies dominated by single-family households and age-segregated childcare systems, children in rural African communities tend to be surrounded by other children of a wide age spectrum throughout their days, including siblings, cousins and extended family members living within or in close distance of their home. The close composition of Hang'ombe homesteads allows parents to entrust older children – their own or extended family members – with the care of toddlers and leave them out of direct adult supervision for several hours a day. Adult family members sometimes assist if the older children are away for school or errands, but by the age of 4–5 years, children are left to roam around in the vicinity of homesteads more or less on their own, providing them with a degree of physical freedom unfamiliar to most children growing up in Western societies today.

As apparent in the extract with Disteria and her peers above, Hang'ombe boys and girls sought to perform many of their daily chores together: fetching water, herding goats, chopping vegetables or picking fruits. Work and play were often intertwined, and adults interfered little with children's organisation of activities as long as they did their chores. The sibling-kin group thus formed a significant unit of children's basic socialisation, allowing them to explore and process the social information gained from different domains of daily life. Varying in age, gender and affinity, such groups provided children with multiple roles and relationships, like ally, caretaker, teacher and authority, creating a relatively safe space for their mutual investigation of the world around them. The intimacy of the homestead and the conduct of household chores gave them close exposure to the lives and concerns of older family members. Much of this exposure remained implicit – that is, without adults' direct clarification – as children were largely expected to remain quiet and attentive in the company of elders, including parents. Out of adults' earshot, however, children could be found chattering intensely with their siblings and peers, examining and creatively employing various kinds of social information available to them. To the interested observer, such chatter may serve as a dense source of insight into children's everyday lives and experiences in a contemporary rural African society.

## Changing Family Lives

Hang'ombe Village constituted a 40km<sup>2</sup> cluster of eighty-two homesteads, placed in the Mapanza District at the lower centre of Zambia's Southern Province. Each homestead was surrounded by maize fields and large bush areas kept uncultivated mainly for the grazing of cattle. Varying widely from one member to several generations cohabiting, these homesteads accommodated around 300 people between the ages of 0–93, most of whom were interrelated through marriage or kin. Referred to in the anthropological literature as the Plateau Tonga (Lancaster and Vickery 2007), the large majority were chiTonga speakers and identified as being Tongas prior to the more abstract category of 'Zambian' (Posner 2005). This also showed linguistically (although many people had at least some proficiency in English), with Zambia's main lingua francae, chiBemba and chiNyanja, communicated almost solely in chiTonga, also when speaking with teachers, nurses, veterinarians or other formally educated personnel. English remained the language of national matters as displayed on radio and TV, in higher administrative offices and, in particular, formal education (Spitulnik 1998).

Practically all families were sustained by farming and cattle herding, and throughout the planting and harvesting seasons from October to early May, men and women spent at least part of their days working in the maize fields, often assisted by their children. Socio-economic differences existed that were primarily centred on sizes of land and livestock and, increasingly, around adult children's level of formal education and employment, but these differences were relatively minor in the face of daily concerns. In the past few decades, life in the village had been challenged by periods of drought and cattle disease, rising fertiliser prices and, perhaps more than anything, the advent of HIV/Aids. On a more immediate scale, economic instability formed the daily organisation of family life, along with the shifting fads of local political powers. While Zambia's national economy had grown rapidly from around 2000 after decades of steep decline, agriculture remained stagnant throughout the region (Resnick and Thurlow 2014), and many farmers struggled to feed their families. Basic tasks like selling vegetables at the market or taking an aging father to the hospital were subject to rather unpredictable circumstances, like heavy rains or the whims of a car-owning relative. Formal jobs were scarce, transient and low paid, like roadwork, revenue collection, or tobacco-handling at local industrial farms. Some villagers ran successful businesses,

vending cell phones and household items in small shops, while others sold the products of a thriving garden to bus passengers passing through town. But most considered themselves poor, unable to obtain the living conditions they desired for themselves and their families.

As Tongas, most families were matrilineally associated, identifying primarily with their maternal relatives, and children of both genders were generally seen as adhering to their mother's relatives also after the payment of full bride price or *lobola*. At the same time, Hang'ombe was a highly patriarchal society, with few women owning land or sustaining their own income, although some, mostly older women, managed the cultivation and sales of vegetables from their own gardens (Cliggett 2000; Mizinga 2000). Most women moved to their husband's homestead when marrying and returned to their father's land if divorcing. Women and girls managed the majority of housework, and while men performed strenuous seasonal chores in the homestead and maize fields, like construction, repairment, ploughing and reaping, they generally possessed more social and physical freedom than women. Girls were assigned with increasingly demanding household chores from the age of five, and while their brothers and male cousins might accompany them, as we saw in the initial example, boys were largely given much more leeway than girls. Such gendered distinctions were sustained by families' strong concern with the moral reputation of young girls, promoting ideals of servility and modesty much more adamantly for girls than boys.

While many aspects of daily life resembled that of people living in the area prior to Zambia's independence in 1964, Hang'ombe Village was in a state of ongoing social change. At school, teachers encouraged both male and female students to postpone childbirth and marriage and pursue further education, prompting their aspirations of professional careers and material wealth. Attracted by the commodified lifestyles they were exposed to in towns and the media, young men and women increasingly sought employment in urban centres, abandoning traditional trades and deeds of village life. Most parents and grandparents supported such chances of economic advance, but they also feared that youngsters' increasing mobility and independence might threaten the intergenerational contract and moral coherence among family members. At the same time, many elders regretted their inability to help children reach a viable pathway in life, as neither farming nor commerce seemed to offer them profitable careers. Basic family structures were thus in flux, increasing conflicts and uncertainties for some while enabling new roles and possibilities for others. Different notions of tradition and

modernity imbued local world views, reflecting mixed experiences and expectations of societal change.

Traversed by the major connecting artery Namwala Road, most homesteads were placed in short walking distance of Mbabala Township, a peri-urban community of about 1,200 inhabitants, hosting a school, a council, a clinic, a marketplace, a few NGO representatives, a police station and a number of tailors, shops and bars. To villagers, the township contained both the promises and pitfalls of modern life. Parents complained about their children's exposure to 'bad behaviours' (*kubula ciimo*) – that is, the flows of alcohol, *dagga* (marihuana), South African TV stations and loud hip-hop music available in the township, widely associated with urban youth culture in Africa and the West. At the same time, the township represented progress and promises of a more comfortable life. The marketplace, established by a union of local farmers in the late 1990s, had become a source of income for many families, with women overseeing the money they earned from selling maize, cabbage and fruits grown in their private gardens. Trucks and buses loaded with travellers between the larger towns of Choma and Namwala ensured a continuous stream of customers for these women, especially after the road's long-awaited tarring in 2010. Nurses, social workers, veterinarians and school teachers present in the township were regarded with admiration and secret envy. With their electrified houses, expensive-looking clothes and sophisticated speech, these people impersonated concepts of schooling and modernity among villagers, most of whom had low education levels themselves. The township's educational establishments – including centres of adult literacy, crafts education and, notably, the local school – were seen as markers of progress for the entire community.

### **Mbabala Basic School**

Placed on the outskirts of the township, Mbabala Basic School covered the schooling of children both within Mbabala and a number of surrounding villages. After the introduction of universal primary education in the late 1990s, most children in the area entered school around the age of seven, and although one or both their parents might also have spent at least a couple of years in school, the matter of course with which boys and girls were sent to school in 2008 was quite new. Many people had mixed feelings towards the local school, at once praising and questioning its ability to provide long-term benefits – further education and/or paid employment – for students and their

families. As noted above, such feelings were particularly pronounced around the continued schooling of young girls, with modern schools encouraging both male and female students to postpone childbirth and marriage beyond their completion of grade twelve (Johnson-Hanks 2006; Stambach 2000). Although most adults in Hang'ombe supported the schooling of their daughters, nieces and granddaughters, many criticised local teachers for instilling them with unrealistic and immoral ideas of a modern, independent life in the city, far away from the daily chores of village life.

While the idea of formal education was surrounded by an almost mythological realm, children's contributions to the sustenance of households and fields were thus generally given much higher priority by local families than their absorption in school-related activities like reading or writing homework. Many parents complained about recurrently having to pay for children's notebooks, pens, uniforms and 'extra lessons', which formed large expenses for most families – and teachers told me how, in spite of their urgent appeals to parents about assisting with the construction of a new classroom building, very few had indeed shown up. These tendencies, rather than revealing villagers' 'bad morals' as some teachers put it to me, might reflect a deep-rooted scepticism towards schooling and its capacity to redeem its promises of a better future for children and their families alike. In spite of gradually increasing enrolment and graduation levels, unemployment in the area remained high, and access to secondary and, in particular, higher education was limited for most youngsters. As noted above, many parents viewed social conduct in the township as a tangible threat to the moral cohesion of families, a concern that the school was unable to soothe in spite of weekly lessons of Moral Education in higher grades. Teachers were respected while at the same time distrusted for their inability to provide children with better futures. As I discuss further on, many Hang'ombe children displayed mixed attitudes towards schooling in line with their parents, perhaps perceiving its ambiguous connotations in local society.

### **Moral Ambiguities**

Like school, the church held a central symbolic space among villagers. Most people considered themselves devoted Christians, frequenting either the Seventh Day Adventist Church (about 70%) or another congregation in the area: Brethren in Christ Church, Nazareen Church,



Roman Catholic Church, New Apostolic Church, Zionist Church or the Church of Jehovah's Witnesses. Men and women sat in separate rows while children ran in and out, playing and chatting with their friends. From around the age of five, many children frequented either a Sabbath or Sunday school, learning Biblical parables and songs. Like school, the church institutionalised ideals of pristinity and righteousness, and like teachers, church elders were respected and feared for their knowledge and literary skills. Phrases like 'God is great' (*Mwami mupati*) and 'worshipping [God] is good' (*kukomba ncibotu*) permeated colloquial speech in many homes, and social conduct was widely assessed by reference to the decora promoted by preachers, like verbal 'softness', generosity, diligence, sobriety, monogamy and sexual moderation.

At the same time, the frequency with which such decora were discussed in local homes also revealed their difficult compatibility with the hardships and temptations of daily life. With sparse food reserves and large families, people did not always act as generously towards their neighbours during periods of starvation or drought as urged to by local preachers, and theft formed an increasing problem across households. Some men went straight to one of the township taverns after finishing their work in the fields, drinking and playing cards, just as some women with tight budgets offered sexual services against payment from well-off, mostly married men, particularly in the township, where chances of meeting non-locals were high. As noted earlier, children's relatively free access to most arenas of daily life provided them with close exposure to the varying, sometimes conflicting terms of adult life. Depending on their level of maturity, children might not fully understand such conflict, as adults rarely offered much explanation. Instead, children used their peers – especially siblings and cousins with whom they spent most of their time outside classrooms – processing, negotiating and creatively appropriating the social knowledge presented to them, gradually producing their own interpretations of the world around them. Centring on such peer interactions and their active interplay with different levels of adult exposure, I argue that children in rural majority settings like Hang'ombe Village acquire an advanced social and linguistic competence highly relevant not only to their present-day lives but also to their potential futures in a fluctuating society. This approach is informed by a number of theoretical strands, which I introduce below.

## Children's Sibling and Kin Cultures

In spite of their prevalence and social significance, especially in rural societies across the majority world, relatively few studies have explored the social dynamics of children's sibling-kin groups ethnographically. One reason may be that such groups often speak in languages that may be unfamiliar to the great majority of social scientists. As childhood sociologist William Corsaro writes,

We know much less about the nature and complexity of children's peer cultures in non-western societies [than in western societies] for a variety of reasons. First, most of the research focuses on children's psychological development rather than the nature of their childhoods and peer cultures. Secondly, children in non-western societies often live challenging lives due to poverty and political instability and often enter the adult world of work at an early age. Research on children in these circumstances is more applied and focuses on documenting the poor conditions of children's lives and developing programs and policies to provide them education and opportunities to have some degree of a childhood ... Thirdly, the dominance of the English language in the world (especially the western academic world) means that many studies and reports of children's lives in non-western societies are not known beyond a particular society or group of societies which share the particular or a similar language. (Corsaro 2009: 308)

Exceptions to this lacuna do exist, however, including ethnographic studies of children's peer and sibling cultures in sub-Saharan Africa. As examples, social psychologist A. Bame Nsamenang has produced a contextually rich literature on patterns of children's socialisation and development prevailing in mid and late twentieth century rural Africa, based on extensive ethnography primarily among Nso children's sibling-kin groups in northern Cameroon (Nsamenang 1992, 2008; Nsamenang and Lamb 1994). Anthropologist David Lancy has explored Kpelle children's self-generated play practices in rural Liberia through thirty years of study, including role play, structured games, songs and storytelling (Lancy 1996, 2015). Geographer Cindi Katz has described Howa children's closely intertwined work and play practices among their siblings and peers in eastern Sudan, analysing the repercussions of broader economic, cultural and political changes on children's lives and potential futures in local society (Katz 2004, 2012). More recently, literary ethnographer Tadesse Jaleta Jirata has pursued Guji children's creative use of traditional riddles in rural Ethiopia, displaying how children thus acquire vital cultural information and establish their own identities and self-expressions in local society (Jirata 2012). Varying in

regional and theoretical scope, these ethnographies show the societal significance of sibling-kin groups to children's basic socialisation, learning and identity formation in contemporary rural Africa, where children spend many of their waking hours unattended by adults.

In Hang'ombe, children's immediate relationships mostly pertained to the homestead and the surrounding fields and gardens, where they spent large parts of their day in the company of different relatives. Children also had more or less stable relationships with classmates, teachers, church elders, neighbours and extended relatives, with whom they interacted in different arenas like the church, the classroom, the township and the homestead, each presenting children with slightly different norms and possibilities. In line with current childhood sociology, I assume all of these relationships and arenas to hold potential influence on the socialisation and basic life experiences of boys and girls, including their own role(s) and ways of navigating in that world. I further assume that children take on varying subject positions, enabling them to reinterpret the various practices and ideologies available to them in accordance with their personal interests and concerns (e.g. Corsaro 2009). As noted earlier, this assumption departs from early understandings of children's socialisation (e.g. Mead 1928; Whiting and Whiting 1975), many of which approached children as miniature adults and their socialisation as a linear, predictable process, tied to older family members' practices and ideals. Child anthropologist Christina Toren has noted how such understandings fail to account for children's ongoing manipulation of the symbolic categories and practices available to them:

It makes no sense to dismiss children's ideas as immature, or to argue that they do not understand what is really going on. Children have to live their lives in terms of their understandings, just as adults do; their ideas are grounded in their experience and thus equally valid. The challenge for the anthropologist is to analyse the processes that make it possible for children to lead effective lives in terms of ideas that are an inversion of those held by their parents and other adults. (Toren 1993: 463)

To make qualified assumptions about children's experiences of the world around them, we must investigate their conduct on their own premises – that is, their personal experiences, relationships, desires and fears. The actions and orientations of parents and other adult figures obviously affect children's lives, enhancing particular experiences while restricting others – perhaps especially in a society where children's lives are closely intertwined with the activities of family members. Children have fewer life experiences to rely on than adults,

and so they observe the routines of older members while learning and establishing their own roles in the world around them. They notice the validity ascribed to different practices, seeing how certain behaviours evoke positive or negative, strong or indifferent reactions, and they try out some of these behaviours and their social impact among peers. Hang'ombe children were generally placed at the lower end of social hierarchy, and so their experience and interpretation of the world around them was marked by certain restrictions and duties, many of which were 'boring, burdensome, or unpleasant', as observed among Beti children in southern Cameroon (Johnson-Hanks 2006: 54). But this subordinate position also allowed children certain privileges, letting them pass relatively unnoticed through daily village life.

### Peer Socialisation Studies

As a growing segment of childhood sociology and anthropology, the linguistic-anthropological paradigm of *language socialisation studies* has made significant contributions on the tangible routines and conditions comprising different childhood experiences. Since its initiation by child anthropologists in the 1980s (Schieffelin and Ochs 1986), the paradigm has pursued the cultural premises for children's – and other novices' – acquisition of and participation in the social practices, knowledge and orientations prevailing in particular societies and settings, like homes, day-care facilities, schools and workplaces, in different parts of the world. Language socialisation scholars have shown the basic significance of *language* in this process, drawing on extensive linguistic-ethnographic studies of everyday interactions among children, their caretakers and teachers. In the past two decades, language socialisation scholars have paid increasing interest to children's interactions with *peers*, unsolicited or at least not directly modified by adults (Cekaite et al. 2014; Goodwin and Kyratzis 2012). Approaching children's peer cultures as marked by their own distinct social routines, interpretive frames and linguistic codes – changing as children grow cognitively and linguistically more adept – this research displays children's complex discursive competences when talking, playing or arguing with their siblings, classmates and friends. Cekaite et al. describe how children's peer cultures may be seen as independent, highly creative appropriations of the social and discursive orders prevailing around them, informing children's identity formation among their peers as well as in their wider social communities:

[T]here is a dialectic, mutually informing, relation between children's and adults' cultures: it is through the processes of 'creative appropriation', 'interpretive reproduction' and even 'secondary adjustments' (e.g. subversive practices, Goffman 1967 cf. Blum-Kulka et al. 2004) that children explore, are socialized, and take their own stance on adult practices, and that they, over time, become part of a dynamically shaped adult culture, acquiring or transforming adult-like communicative competences and resources. Children in peer activities can be seen to both appropriate and reinterpret adult practices and resources in ways that make them peer specific. (Cekaite et al. 2014: 6)

Although predominantly conducted in Western societies, an increasing number of peer socialisation studies have explored children's lifeworlds in majority settings, often centring on children's playful interactions with their siblings and kin: Laurence R. Goldman has analysed how Huli children in Papua New Guinea evoke and actively interplay with local cosmologies and narrative conventions in their peer activities of pretence play (Goldman 1998). Amanda Minks has depicted a sibling-kin group of 7–12-year-old Miskitu children in eastern Nicaragua creatively combining features from different linguistic registers associated with a powerful elite, like teacher talk and media discourse, thus positioning themselves as competent, autonomous actors in the local social order (Minks 2006, 2008, 2010, 2013). Jennifer Reynolds has revealed how kin-related Mayan children in Guatemala negotiate and sometimes subvert existing power relations through the playful use of different linguistic genres, routines and registers commonly associated with adult authoritative figures, like the greeting '*Buenos días*' combined with a military salute (Reynolds 2007), the Spanish reconquest genre *El Desafío* (Reynolds 2010) and local, historically anchored expressions of social delinquency and lynching (Reynolds 2013). Amy Paugh's decade-long studies among young siblings and kin-related peers on the Caribbean island of Dominica (Paugh 2005, 2012) have shown children's central role in the ongoing national language shift, a process charged with complex historical issues of identity, power, resistance and change. Camilla Rindstedt has illustrated how young Quichua siblings on the Ecuadorian sierra play with prevailing power structures between indigenous people and the mestizos, mimicking the linguistic registers of both authoritative and subordinate adult figures (Rindstedt 2001; Rindstedt and Aronsson 2002). Lourdes de León has explored a group of young siblings' interactions in Chiapas, Mexico, describing their linguistically subtle, ongoing negotiations of age-based roles and hierarchies, mimicking and subverting the registers and routines of adults around them (De León 2007, 2009, 2015, 2018). Flores Nájera

has studied bilingual, Nahuatl-Spanish-speaking children in Tlaxcala, Mexico, revealing the older children's strategic use of code-switching and honorific forms towards their younger siblings during play (Nájera 2009). Kathryn Howard's studies of young rural children in northern Thailand (Howard 2007, 2009a, 2009b) have revealed children's participation in the ongoing language shift between the vernacular Kam Muang and Standard Thai, positioning themselves against the puritanical demands of both parents and teachers and creating their own syncretic variety.

These peer socialisation studies all reveal children's active roles in processes of societal reproduction and change, interacting with local family systems, power relations, linguistic ideologies, economic and educational structures etc. Perhaps more than Western societies, societies in the majority world tend to undergo sociocultural and economic changes in rapid, uneven ways, evoking a particular need for new interpretations of current realities. Children produce such interpretations in the relative experimental freedom of the peer group, making it a potent arena for studying both immediate and larger societal themes. Ethnographic childhood studies reveal broad cultural and linguistic varieties in children's lifeworlds, but they also show generic patterns of intimacy and dispute, social adaptability and creativity – qualities that may be socially and emotionally enhanced in the shared horizon of close-knit rural societies in the majority world in which most children rely heavily on each other's attention and support.

Inspired by peer socialisation studies' close ethnographic, agency-oriented research approach to children's lives and practices in everyday life, the current study gives both empirical and analytical prominence to children's verbal interactions with peers and other central actors around them and the personal perspectives these interactions may reveal. Grounded in the field of linguistic anthropology, peer socialisation studies produce detailed analyses of the distinctive linguistic features of children's peer interactions, revealing their creative use and growing mastery of different linguistic means and registers available to them. Such close attention to linguistic detail allows for the tangible scrutiny of complex social and developmental processes, like children's active acquisition of specific cultural knowledge. However, linguistic analyses may often appear somewhat inaccessible to non-linguist readers, in spite of shared interests in themes of, for example, childhood, identity, socialisation and schooling. With the aim of addressing a broad readership of students, scholars and practitioners, the analyses of this book generally centre

more on *what* Hang'ombe children talk about (and also what they omit talking about) in certain situations than on *how* they talk about it. Obviously, such distinction between linguistic form and content has long been dismissed by modern sociolinguistics, demonstrating their inseparability in authentic human interaction (Hymes 1967). But whereas language socialisation and peer socialisation studies generally focus on children's acquisition of specific linguistic formats (Kulick and Schieffelin 2004), my analyses focus more broadly on Hang'ombe children's experiences and appropriations of the cultural knowledge and conventions presented to them, including locally significant linguistic registers. As such, the book might be classified as intersecting social and linguistic anthropology, employing extracts of Hang'ombe children and adults' everyday talk as micro-ethnographic entries into the different social arenas that the children inhabit and co-produce. Drawing on a spectrum of childhood and Africanist studies, the book's analyses entail wider discussions of children's roles and perspectives in a changing majority world society, as I elaborate below.

### Exploring 'the African Child'

Recent ethnographies have avoided prevailing tendencies to either victimise or romanticise the 'African child', instead bringing out more diverse, experience-based accounts of children growing up in various parts and strata of contemporary Africa (e.g. Abebe and Ofose-Kusi 2016; Christiansen, Utas and Vigh 2006; Ensor 2012; Honwana and De Boeck 2005; Spittler and Bourdillon 2012). Common to these accounts is a focus on children's integral roles and complex agencies in local African communities of various kinds, 'theoriz[ing] how children, through their engagements in the social, economic, cultural and political life of their societies, contribute to the reconfiguration of social and generational dynamics unfolding in their societies' (Abebe and Ofose-Kusi 2016: 305). While acknowledging the prevalence of political and economic challenges across the African continent, affecting the lives of adults, youths and children alike, these scholars underline the need for studies of more nuanced and mundane everyday experiences among African children, including play and leisure activities. Rather than reinforce the 'othering' and homogenisation of African identities common to media, political and research discourse throughout the past century, we should study the increasing implications of globally and world-historically constructed ideas; for example, on childhood, education, work and family life in Africa, as in any other part of the

contemporary world (Abebe and Ofosu-Kusi 2016; Imoh 2016). The central actors of this book are based in an African village, a setting approached by countless anthropologists and historians throughout the past century. However, accentuating children's own interactions and accounts – primarily with their siblings and kin but also with their parents, grandparents, teachers and other adult figures – I seek to rework stereotypical images of both 'the African village' and 'the African child'. Implementing broad-scale theories of uncertainty and post-colonialism to the ethnographic paradigms of childhood sociology and peer language socialisation studies, I analyse the children's creative interactions with both local and global conditions in their daily social practices, containing both common and quite particular childhood experiences.

### **Lived Uncertainties**

I thus combine close analysis of children's peer cultures and interactions with broader patterns in their daily lives in a rural African society, including aspects of class, gender, schooling, religion and generational and political changes. Contextualising such insights, I draw on prominent anthropological theories on life, sociality and intimacy in contemporary Africa, most of which explore *uncertainty* as a productive, indispensable living condition. In the past decade, such theories have allowed a rethinking of conventional 'development'-oriented research, enabling a literature more closely tied to people's subjective experiences, dilemmas, actions and aspirations (e.g. Cliggett et al. 2007; Cooper and Pratten 2015; Haram and Yamba 2009). Approaching uncertainty as 'a structure of feeling – the lived experience of a pervasive sense of vulnerability, anxiety, hope, and possibility mediated through the material assemblages that underpin, saturate, and sustain everyday life' (Cooper and Pratten 2015: 1), this literature reveals the often advanced strategies employed by individuals living in constantly shifting contexts of social interdependence, climatic changes and political and economic instabilities. As examples, Jennifer Johnson-Hanks describes the judicious pregnancy planning among educated Beti women in southern Cameroon, balancing a complex moral economy between local honour systems and the contradictory demands of modern schooling in what she calls *vital conjunctures* (Johnson-Hanks 2006). Susan Whyte and Godfrey E. Siu explore Ugandan HIV patients' vigilant management of what the authors refer to as social and historical *contingencies* in order to ensure medical



treatment and create better lives for themselves (Whyte and Siu 2015). Peter Geschiere depicts the witchcraft practices thriving across contemporary Africa as a logical, highly modern response to what he refers to as the fundamental *ambiguity of intimacy*, offering both solace and potential deceit (Geschiere 2013).

Compared to some parts of contemporary Africa, a Zambian village like Hang'ombe might offer children relative stability in terms of food, housing, family care, access to medication and schooling – but experiences of uncertainty and ambiguity also prevail in this part of the continent, affecting children and adults alike. Families' general vulnerability towards climatic and economic fluctuations urges children to remain alert and industrious and to adopt changing living standards and family compositions as some members leave and others arrive. Different and sometimes contradictory conventions prevail in different social arenas, inciting children to manoeuvre in flexible and often creative ways. On a wider scale, fluctuating global markets and trends affect children's future horizons as conceived by themselves, their teachers and caretakers, revealing new possibilities along with sudden risks and restraints.

In his book *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt*, anthropologist James Ferguson explores the sociocultural and psychological repercussions of the radical societal changes marking Zambia's more recent history (Ferguson 1999). Through the narrated life experiences of mine workers in the Zambian Copperbelt, he unfolds the post-independent euphoria and rapid infrastructural development of the late 1960s, the steep economic decline and despair following the global copper crisis in the mid 1970s and the subsequent decades of struggle among large parts of the population to re-create not only a physical livelihood but also a revised sense of self. From modern cosmopolitans and world citizens, many Zambians now had to adopt a more humble self-image and existence, often involving the re-establishment of strained kinship relations and responsibilities (Ferguson 1999: 123ff). Zambia's economic situation has gradually changed since, but the *crisis of meaning* called out by Ferguson and others (Crehan 1997; Ferguson 1999: 14; Moore and Vaughan 1994) seems to have endured, visible, for example, in the high unemployment rate prevailing especially in Zambia's urban areas (World Bank 2013) and the increasing hardships among young men both in rural and urban areas to provide for a wife and children, let alone their aging parents (Cliggett 2005). In a study on relations between urban space, socio-economic mobility and gender in the lives of adolescents in Lusaka, anthropologist Karen Tranberg Hansen

suggests that many young Zambians – especially men – now struggle to attain the economic status and independence necessary for them to be recognised as adults, not only by older generations but also among themselves (Hansen 2005). Confronted with alluring global media discourses of their ‘potential as the leaders of tomorrow’ (Hansen 2005: 13), as well as with the local realities of global neoliberalism – that is, increased social and economic uncertainty, inequality and exclusion (Hansen 2005: 4) – the young people in Hansen’s study express the literal and metaphorical challenge of being ‘stuck in the compound’, unable to transcend the social and economic constraints associated with being young and poor.

Although Ferguson and Hansen’s studies were both conducted in urban areas in the 1990s, the crisis of meaning they address also concerns the generations of Zambians currently living in rural communities like Hang’ombe. The families I observed all conveyed fundamental experiences of uncertainty, not just physically and financially – southern Zambia had been struck by cattle decease and severe drought in the past decade, affecting livestock and maize, two dominant sources of food and income in the region – but also experiences of devastating social change, like a weakening of kinship ties and intergenerational reciprocity, a disbelief in the capacities of schooling and increasing cases of theft, violence and alcoholism. My study pursues Hang’ombe children’s various ways of encountering and dealing with such uncertainty, primarily through the ethnographic lens provided by social interactions with their siblings and kin, like the extract at the outset of this chapter to which I now return.

## Appropriating Adult Discourse

In the extract at the beginning of this chapter, 9-year-old Disteria, her brother Munsanje (7), their cousin Richwel (9), and their young aunt Frida (10) were depicted in the middle of an ongoing interaction as they were walking the approximately 5 km back and forth to the village well from their mutual homestead. Slightly more confident and verbally adept than her peers, Disteria dominated much of this interaction, perhaps incited by the fact that I had asked her to keep the digital recorder in her front pocket this afternoon. As the extract begins, Disteria initiates the group’s collective singing of the hymn ‘*Hallelujah, alumbwe mwami wesu*’ (Hallelujah, praise Our God), imitating the oratorical style of local preachers at the weekly sermons (line 1). Her three peers immediately join in (line 2), seemingly familiar

with the hymn from church and most likely also from home. The Adventist Church held a strong social and symbolic role among all the families I observed, including the Mweemba's, and collective singing was common, especially among women working or walking together in fields and households. Young girls often sang with their mothers or older sisters in the gardens, shifting between voices and enabling both a spiritual and social communion among them. Disteria's call may be seen as inviting a similar communion among her peers but also as her active appropriation of a sophisticated practice like the part-singing of Christian hymns, interplaying with common ideals and modes of self-expression. When talking with peers, boys and girls often evoked the symbols and practices of church – singing, quoting the Bible or mimicking the grave voice and dramatic gestures and register common to local preachers.

As their singing ends, Disteria and her peers start talking about personal hygiene, sharing their routines and frequencies of bathing (lines 6–17) – practices that among most families indicated a person's level of social decency. Munsanje asks if Disteria is going to bathe as they return from their long walk (line 6) – perhaps airing his own aversion to bathing, which had already been subject to some dispute among them earlier on. Disteria and Frida both confirm this question (lines 7–8), Disteria keenly elaborating that 'Immediately when I get in the bathroom, I will quickly wash my legs, wash my head and, in the end, the whole body' (line 9). She asks Frida if she is as meticulous in her bathing as herself, or if she just 'pours water on her body' (line 10), a question Frida does not answer. Such concern with the details of personal hygiene, dress and appearance was often expressed among girls and women, especially young teenagers whose preparation for marital eligibility had begun. Mothers urged their daughters and sons to wash frequently and wear clean, presentable clothes whenever they were not busy working, and members of all ages dressed immaculately – and expensively – for the weekly sermons. The children's interest in each other's bathing routines may reflect such parental concerns but can also be seen as their appropriation of a powerful moral discourse, prevalent in local preachers' talk of cleanliness (*bulondo*) as a Christian virtue and in teachers' promotion of a modern, civilised lifestyle. Challenging the authority of such discourse, Munsanje notes: 'I don't usually bathe, the water is very cold' (line 12). This upsets Frida, who threatens him with report (line 13), most likely to his mother Jackie, the female authority of their mutual home – but Munsanje does not subside, instead threatening to beat her (line 14). Disteria now interferes, asking Munsanje matter-of-factly why he wants to beat Frida

when she is simply telling the truth – and then repeats Frida’s threat to ‘tell auntie’ (line 15). 9-year-old Richwel then evokes the school’s moral authority, saying ‘Our teacher beats those who don’t bathe’ (line 16). Munsanje responds ‘Our teacher doesn’t beat’ (line 17), cleverly questioning Richwel’s claim rather than defending his own bathing aversion. Corporal punishment had been contested and prohibited among Mbabala teachers in recent years, following national campaigns and a gradual change in attitude towards children’s education across homes and schools. However, some teachers were known to threaten or give students an occasional beating if provoked. Munsanje thus elicits wider themes of modern and traditional authority informing different aspects of the children’s lives. He then adds ‘But I don’t have time to bathe’ (line 17), underlining his wilful position against such authorities.

The interaction between Munsanje, Disteria, Frida and Richwel depicts a widespread concern among the Hang’ombe children I observed with the social and moral discourses of the institutions dominating their lives: teacher talk and school regulations in and out of classrooms, preacher conduct and church etiquette, parental directives and rebukes – all were vehemently discussed and appropriated in creative ways, often testing or challenging prevailing norms and hierarchies, like in the latter part of the children’s talk above. Negotiating social and moral orders across households, the children sought to build favourable positions for themselves among peers, gradually developing their own social and discursive skills.

## **Composition of the Book**

Exploring Hang’ombe children’s interactions with their immediate social environments, mostly at home and at school, the book’s chapters are built around extracts of everyday talk among children, their peers and caretakers, selected from a large corpus of ethnographic observations and digital sound recordings. Like Corsaro, I approach the children as active, collective producers of peer cultures constantly interacting with factors prevailing both within and beyond the constraints of the peer or kin-sibling group, including the adults around them (Corsaro 2009). In line with peer language socialisation studies, I illustrate how Hang’ombe children use their peer interactions not only to explore and reproduce the ambiguous social order prevailing around them but also to negotiate and sometimes subvert this order, building alignments and positions for themselves and each other both

within and beyond the peer group. Following current trends in child anthropology (James and Prout 1997; Qvortrup et al. 2009), I approach the children as relatively independent actors, possessing their own agencies, interests and interpretations of the social and institutional arenas in which they take part while at the same time depending on such arenas.

In Chapter 1, I review the volatile undertaking of fieldwork underlying this work and the sequence of events leading to its final shape. I introduce the members of the four homesteads participating in the study and reflect upon my own positionality as a white educated woman. I discuss my own and my research assistant Khama Hang'ombe's increasing attention to children's peer interactions and consider ethical and methodological issues associated with this approach, including ethnographic work among minors and the use of local interpreters. Finally, I present my considerations on the transcription and presentation of data in this book.

In Chapter 2, I explore the basic routines and relationships framing Hang'ombe children's early socialisation, closely tied to the sustenance of families and the close interdependency between family and community members. Drawing on sociocultural learning theories, I present the socio-affective ideals underlying children's participation in the endeavours of older family members and the sometimes conflicting interests and uncertainties appearing among family members living in a changing society. Lastly, I discuss the social implications of children's relatively unimpeded access to the concerns and moral ambiguities of adult life, which they are exposed to in different arenas; for example, in the local township and in the lively talk around family fires at night.

In Chapter 3, I explore children's responses to the various kinds of social information available to them in daily life, focusing on their interactions with siblings and kin. Drawing on peer language socialisation studies, I illustrate children's creative and sometimes subversive appropriation of prevailing power structures and discuss the social and educational aspects of such appropriation.

In Chapter 4, I investigate the tangible and symbolic domain of schooling, analysing classroom practices and ideologies as it might be experienced by Hang'ombe children. From there, I return to households and discuss the ambiguities of schooling as a powerful, yet precarious enterprise. Extending from Chapter 3, I continue to analyse children's creative use of academic discourse in their peer interactions, thus challenging prevailing stereotypes of rural African children as uneducated or deprived.

Finally, in the Conclusion, I reflect upon some of the participating children's current life situations, especially in terms of schooling. Resuming from the initial chapter, I discuss the book's depictions of daily community life and concerns in the light of fundamental uncertainties, along with historical events preceding current life circumstances among the Plateau Tongas. I summarise the distinct learning trajectories and communicative practices adopted by Hang'ombe children and discuss, briefly, how such trajectories and practices might be sustained and utilised more constructively in formal education.

## **Note**

1. Disteria held the recorder, recording herself and her peers for a few hours.