

The Child Martyr: Political Roles of Children And Their Images. Questions From The ‘Arab’ Countries

Élise GUILLERMET*

In Syria¹, activists issued a call to dedicate a planned March on 28 May 2011 to Hamza Ali Al-Khatib, a thirteen-year-old boy who was tortured, mutilated and killed by security forces in Deraa. His portrait and a video of his corpse were broadcast on Syrian websites as well as on the Internet². This diffusion of macabre images is clearly motivated by two purposes: to mobilize local demonstrators³, and to sensitize international public opinion by exposing Bashar Al-Assad as an inhuman tyrant who massacres innocent and powerless children. Comments posted on H  l  ne Sallon’s blog (Monde.fr) illustrate French public opinion: ‘I’m totally upset by this cruelty. The culprits must be arrested and locked up with a life sentence and solitary confinement because cruelty is ever frequent nowadays’; ‘This child’s abuse is evil! How can we do something like that to a 13-year-old kid! The present Syrian regime proves itself barbarous and doesn’t have legitimacy to govern! The culprits will must provide an account of this outrageous deed and will never be in peace anywhere! I curse these criminals, these murderers of Bashar al-Assad’s bloodthirsty regime’⁴.

In these sentences, Western constructions of childhood are reified in ways similar to how Jean-Herv   J  z  quel (2009) highlighted child soldiers. In both cases, the child is considered vulnerable, the victim of conflicts or atrocities - but not as a political actor.

The uses of the child as martyr figure invite us to inquire into post-Second World War perceptions by highlighting the roles effectively attributed to children in political confrontations.

We will begin our discussion through a short synthesis of writings on this figure and on the everyday lives of children living in conflict contexts, as expressed by themselves. The idea of vulnerable children will be discussed in the same way in analyzing pictures of children produced in ‘the Arab spring’. An analysis of a corpus of data edited by Foreign Policy, which begins with a portrait of a Yemenite boy who wrote on his forehead, ‘I am the next martyr’, will illustrate how Western perceptions of the child living in a war situation are changing in relation to with the recent uprisings. We’ll conclude with some questions that appeared to us in Morocco when a picture of a child encircled by royal forces during a demonstration became a symbol of oppression, or at least the threat of oppression. We will discuss what this moment reveals about the origins of political mobilizations.

* Anthropologist, Postdoctoral Student, UMR 912 (INSERM-IRD-U2). Email: elise.guillermet@yahoo.fr

¹ I thank warmly Salima Ahmadou for the wealth of our discussions, and Flavian Bouchet for his attentive and friendly reading.

² H  l  ne Sallon, journalist on the Monde.fr, synthesizes data on this event. Her paper was posted on 31 May 2011: <http://printempsarabe.blog.lemonde.fr/2011/05/31/hamza-al-khatib-visage-de-la-contestation-syrienne/>

³ A video was posted on 28 May 2011 by the Syrian activists: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3zbjpu4OPdg&feature=player_embedded

⁴ Our translation.

The child martyr figure

The revival of the child martyr figure invites us to consider its earlier uses in order to question current Western ideas of childhood.

At the end of the Second World War, the Geneva Convention of 1949 was established to allow protection to children living in a war context. In 1977, two texts were added about child soldiers, asserting that the guilty parties are not the youths themselves but, rather, the armed groups' leaders who manipulate them. In 1989, the Convention on the Rights of Children was ratified, enhancing the idea of a malleable and vulnerable child. But this normative background, thought in a first time from the injured Western countries, does not reflect all the local perceptions of childhood. The anthropology of childhood often demonstrates much variation, particularly in a context of political conflict. According to David Rosen (2007), when young soldiers in Sierra Leone were acquitted by courts in relation to international law, the victims of the soldiers' crimes exactions disagreed with the verdict. The figure of the irresponsible child was opposed to that of the guilty child.

The distinction is based on the definition of the behavior of children as either intentional or unintentional during conflicts. Research on child soldiers in sub-Saharan Africa, synthesized by Patricia Huyghebaert (2009), shows how children accept becoming engaged in conflicts because of the economic, social, ideological, and religious stakes such conflicts hold for them. A study on the impact of armed threats on children's mental health, conducted by Ahmad Baker and Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian (1999) in a Palestinian camp, demonstrates that the expression of fear by the boys lessened during the intifada (whereas the girls felt more vulnerable because of the risks to be harassed if their siblings were suspected or arrested) whereas their self-esteem as resisters (and not passive and landless victims) was spontaneously expressed.

In the context of the First World War in France, Manon Pignon (2006) describes how children perceived their roles in the conflict through analyzing girls' diaries, as well as correspondence between some children and their fathers. We can read how young people felt that they were engaged in the war - either because of their future status of soldiers for the boys, or because of their knitting activities for the girls. Their writings demonstrate how their everyday lives were constrained by the absence of their fathers, their fear of bombings, and their hunger.

From these heterogeneous examples, children do not appear as passive witnesses to war but, clearly, as human beings, engaged in the conflicting stakes that impact their lives economically, emotionally and physically.

Furthermore, the child martyr figure makes clear the emic considerations of children's roles during the war. The child is tortured and executed during a repression because he is considered a political traitor by the armed forces as well as glorified as a hero by activists because he played a role. This figure is not new.

A look back upon the past will permit us to understand that child abuse is not only a proof of tyranny, sent to international public opinion but, first of all, a political tool at the heart of the conflict, used to threaten or to mobilize.

The child martyr was honored on the Parisian barricades at the end of the 19th century. The most famous is probably *Gavroche* who has continued to animate high school literature courses since 1862, when the first edition of *Les Misérables* was published. This protagonist incarnates the 'gamins' ('kids') of Paris, engaged in the Republican risings of the 19th century. Hugo's novel followed the 1830 immortalization of these children by the artist

Delacroix with his painting *La liberté guidant le peuple* ('Freedom leading the People'). Other artists gave the status of hero to youth martyrs in this French context. Another example is the song *L'enfant Martyr de la Rue Vaneau*⁵ ('The child martyr of Vaneau Street') in 1897. Jean-Jacques Yvrol (2002) describes the iconographic consideration of the 'gamin' of Paris and shows that he is often associated with the insurrectionist. He specifies that he is glorified but also slandered. In this ambivalent treatment, the political role of the child is taken for granted. Jean-Hervé Jézéquel (2006: 103) reminds us the valorization of children's engagement during the US Civil War and the two World Wars. Stéphane Andoin-Rouzeau describes it for the First World War (1993). More recently, during the first Palestinian intifada against Israel, some boys acted and were or killed during bomb attacks or executed. Their names were glorified by artists and they were seen as heroes by the next generation (Ahmad Baker & Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian 1999).

The role played by children, shown from their perspective, and glorified by activists or resisters, must be considered because these constructions of an active child motivate child abuses committed by the armed forces. For instance, Joseph Vincent Ntuda Ebode (2006) argues that in the conflicts in Sub-Saharan Africa, children are considered political actors because of their kinship and their social identity and also because they will become powerful adults influenced by their early experiences. According to Ebode, armed groups decide to enlist children in order to control them over a long period. Another option is to massacre the other camp and eradicate the new generation. There is no place for the idea of innocence in a crisis.

How, through pictures, are the ideas of martyr-active child and vulnerable-innocent child mobilized in the current context of the 'Arab Spring'? Are constructions of childhood shifting?

Images from the international

Foreign Policy⁶ has published a slide show, entitled 'Children of the revolution', made by two contributors: Suzanne Merkelson and Aylin Zafar. The first paragraph giving the legend indicates the change of constructions of childhood: 'Many children have died and countless more have been injured, orphaned, or displaced from their homes over the course of this year's Arab uprisings. But the Arab Spring's youngest are not only victims - leading chants in Cairo's Tahrir Square to joining up with Libya's rebel fighters to camping out in Pearl Square in Bahrain to being jailed for writing the graffiti that inspired Syria to rise up, the children of the Arab Spring are proving that the future belongs to them'. The children are not only victims but also actors and they prove that the future is their future and their production. Such affirmations in the front page of this American media source are particularly interesting: the role of children in the Mediterranean context is valorized and not condemned. Thus this album tries to differ with humanitarian reports highlighting the children's deeds. Foreign Policy presents how children play during the revolutions, by 22 slides taken in Bahrain, in Egypt, in Libya, in Syria and in Yemen. The recurrence of some situations, likewise the choice of the shoots with gender criteria seem to reveal local distinctions as well as the photograph's focus. 6 girls are photographed for 22 images. 3 of them appear as passive witnesses (they don't pray or they eat in the crowd) or scared (a girl hides from the noise of

⁵ Colonge and Crottat wrote the lyrics and Deconclois composed the music. Edited by the Maison Bigot, collection *À la chanson populaire*: <http://medihal.archives-ouvertes.fr/medihal-00521292/en/>

⁶ <http://www.foreignpolicy.com/>

her father's weapon). The 3 other girls take part in a march. The role of children as demonstrators is the most featured with 11 pictures, especially in Yemen. The other pictures illustrate armed boys in battle dress (3) and wounded boys (2), mostly in Libya. The gender opposition is clear: girls are passive and boys are fighters. The 'play' dimension is implied in some pictures which associate a joyful child with a tank, a rifle or a ruler's portrait in Libya and in Syria. In my opinion, this is the most interesting point of the album: children are mobilized by the two camps (the protesters and the leaders' troops). These images are a good example that enables us to take distance from the Manichean idea that children are only used by barbarous regimes (Jézéquel 2006: 100). It invites us to conduct ethnographic research on how the children are initiated to act during political conflict, as Spyros Spyrou (2006) proposes in Cyprus for example or Cüneyd Okay (2007) for the Second Constitutional during the Ottoman Period.

Political uses of images. Children are future leaders

To summarize, the recent uprisings in the 'Arab countries' draw attention to the role of children in democratic processes. The Western idea of a child enlisted unintentionally in sinister armed groups, in sub-Saharan Africa, morphs into the figure of an active child fighting for freedom and glorified for his engagement.

Analysing the uses of the martyr figure, with the example of Hamza, reveals the political importance of its production and circulation. I propose to focus on a picture, less emotionally strong than the photography of Hamza, taken in Morocco and appropriated by the activists during May 2011. This picture is taken from a video posted on Youtube⁷ and Facebook after the Casablanca demonstration of May 29th 2011. Three friends, furious, showed me this video. They claimed that royal security forces beat demonstrators and especially a mother and her young son.

'It is a shame! How it is possible? Watch the video! You will see that the cops beat the mother as she carries the child on her back. Suddenly she lets her child on the ground and she reacts'. When I watched the video, I observed not only these events; I also saw the fight between protestors and policemen and the fear of members of the crowd who tried to escape. Some protestors were wounded. A mother and a boy on her back were followed by policemen with shields, helmets and clubs. The mother fell into a rage in front of some policemen, ready to protect her son. She searched for a weapon as the child cried. The snapshot of this moment is 'shared' by some activists on Facebook on their 'wall': the policemen on the right with their truncheons, the mother in a furious stance and the child in the background⁸. This picture was chosen by the February 20th committee (group of activists) for the placard 'No repression' of the 5th June's march, which followed violent beatings against some demonstrators. During the protest, some children wore t-shirts emblazoned with this placard's slogan: 'No violence against children'. The slogan, in a performative way, means 'we are protesting but don't hit us!'. This amounts to saying that the child martyr is not a necessity in a democratic process, only the fear of a child being wounded is enough to gather and mobilize. The way the children wore this slogan demonstrates how children are considered as protestors who can take part in peaceful resistance.

⁷ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TCnXRrk_cbY&feature=player_embedded#!

⁸ See the attached picture "no repression".

This picture is used by the activists to contend that the Moroccan regime could potentially be repressive, arbitrary and inhumane. The perception of beatings, even if these deeds do not appear in the video exactly like my friends described it, illustrates the revival of common memories: 'It is like in the past! If we don't protest, if we don't stay aware, it will happen again. People will be ill-treated, arrested and will disappear'. This is an allusion to the reign of King Hassan II. A move toward 'reconciliation' was made by the 'Instance Équité et Réconciliation' in 2004, after the beginning of the reign of King Mohammed VI. Victims executed or imprisoned under Hassan II were registered in order to compensate them. The report of the Instance was contested by some human rights organization. Most of all, this past is not only History; it is families' histories and the memories of children who became adults. The activists make that explicit: violence used in the past is neither forgotten nor forgiven. It determines the present.

This continuity perceived by Moroccan protestors reveals a common idea of children despite the differences between the figures of the vulnerable and the active child: the child is a human being constrained by his upbringing and context. Like a witness, an active protestor or a fighter, he begins to be a political actor. That is why the demonstrators or the armed forces recruit them and why humanitarian organizations try to protect them.

A sociological analysis of the activists' trajectories might be relevant to understanding how their past influences their engagement today. To a certain extent, for the protestors who were once children, the uprising brings up old issues. It claims justice from the past.

Bibliography

- ANDOIN-ROUZEAU S. (1993). *La guerre des enfants (1914-1918)*. Paris: A. Colin.
- BAKER A. & SHALHOUB-KEVORKIAN N. (1999). Effects of political and military traumas on children: the Palestinian case. *Clinical Psychology Review* 19(8): 938-960.
- HUYGHEBAERT P. (2009). Les enfants dans les conflits armés : une analyse à l'aune des notions de vulnérabilité, de pauvreté et de 'capabilités'. *Mondes en développement* 146 : 59-72.
- JÉZÉQUEL J.-H. (2006). Les enfants soldats d'Afrique: un phénomène singulier? *Vingtième siècle. Revue d'histoire* 89: 99-108.
- NTUDA EBODE J.V. (2006). Les enfants soldats dans les crises africaines : entre logiques militaires et stratégies politiques. *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains* 222: 111-119.
- OKAY C. (2007). War and Child in the Second Constitutional Period. In Georgeon F. & Kreiser K. (ed.), *Enfance et jeunesse dans le monde musulman* (219-232). Paris : Maisonneuve & Larose.
- PIGNON M. (2006). Petites filles dans la grande guerre. Un problème de genre? *Vingtième siècle. Revue d'histoire* 89: 9-16.
- ROSEN D. (2007). Child Soldiers, International Humanitarian Law, and the Globalization of Childhood. *American Anthropologist* 109: 296-306.
- SPYROU S. (2006). Constructing 'the Turk' as an Enemy: The Complexity of Stereotypes in Children's Everyday Worlds. In Dimitrios T. (ed.), *When Greek Think About Turks: The View from Anthropology* (95-110). London & New York: Routledge.

YVOREL J.-J. (2002). De Delacroix à Poulbot, l'image du gamin de Paris. *Revue d'histoire de l'enfance 'irrégulière'* 4: 39-72.