

Street Credit: The Cultural Politics of African Street Children's Hunger

By Karen Coen Flynn

A fleeting, shadowy segment of documentary footage depicts someone off-camera handing a group of hungry African street boys a pot of cooked rice. Immediately joined by others, a melee ensues as they start shoving and punching one another to get a fistful. This bleak scene in “Darwin’s Nightmare” (Sauper 2004) provides a real-life glimpse into one aspect of the cultural politics of street-children’s hunger in the city of Mwanza, Tanzania.¹ And make no mistake, the causes behind these children’s hunger are *cultural* and their power struggles *political*; there is nothing *natural* about chronic hunger in our world.

Some observers may interpret the boys’ behavior as typical of street children, and certainly destitute girls and boys often fight over these types of food handouts, as well as prime begging areas, and relationships with particular street adults who provide food. Others might also view the boys’ struggle as one over *street credit*, commonly portrayed by pop singers, graffiti artists, and others employing urban/street language cross-culturally as the credibility or status one gains by performing bold, illegal and/or violent acts. Certainly Mwanza’s street children occasionally obtained food in such ways by daring to rob child vendors selling penny candy, stealing fruit from market vendors or pick-pocketing other street children.

Yet there was more to the food-related street-credit economy in Mwanza than simply the status gained by street children—in the eyes of other street children—for engaging in bold or unlawful acts. For instance these youth also sought opportunities to

acquire street credit in the eyes of the general public, as in the case where a group of street boys, encouraged by an assembly of adult male bystanders, beat-up three street girls who inadvertently crossed into the boys' food-begging turf. A street girl also could acquire street credit among her peers in positive ways, such as by sharing a snack she earned by working at a roadside cafe. In addition even private citizens sought street credit among their friends and acquaintances by offering food charity from their kitchens to disparagingly stereotyped "dirty" and "dangerous" street children. So while many of the youth's food-acquisition activities were directly linked to the local street-credit economy, the children were neither the sole participants seeking status therein nor were their efforts to obtain food restricted to audacious, criminal and/or cruel acts.

I recognize that while in any situation the distinction may blur between a child's intent to gain street credit or simply obtain enough food to survive the moment. I also understand that the means by which street credit was calculated and disbursed were not only dependent on situational specifics but also the given participants, including the audience at hand. Given this complexity I can only offer very general descriptions of the ways in which these children's obtained food and street credit. Yet one of my fundamental points is that street children partook—sometimes willingly, often very reluctantly—in food-acquisition activities that largely shaped, and were shaped by, local meanings associated with the concepts of childhood, work, and gender, and the street credit associated with these activities, in turn, further illuminated power/prestige differentials among the various participants engaged with Mwanza's politics of hunger.

Another point that I wish to emphasize is that in spite of the diverse ways in which these children fed themselves, their acquisition of food in the form of private charity

appears to be strikingly significant because in these situations the children were not the only ones seeking to gain an advantage. While a street child sought to benefit by getting something to eat, an alms-giver concurrently sought street credit in the form of prestige in the community or personal favor with God. What is key about this relatively innocuous aspect of the local street-credit economy is that by successfully establishing these types of exchange relationships with alms-givers, “marginalized” street children actively positioned themselves more closely to the “mainstream” than is widely recognized, and these actions not only had practical on-the-ground consequences for understanding certain street-youth’s survival strategies in Mwanza, but also have broader policy implications concerning the relationship of private charity to public-entitlement programs as well as hunger relief (Van Esterik 1997).

My interest in the cultural politics of hunger stems from my observation that various people in Mwanza had vastly different opportunities to access food despite an ample year-round supply. In addition Mwanza was populated primarily by self-described “Africans,” with self-identifying “Asians” and “Arabs” comprising a small minority.ⁱⁱ Despite this diversity, all of the street people and the very poor were Africans, which implied that certain social inequalities distinguished Asians and Arabs from Africans. These inequalities exist, on the one hand, because for several generations Asians—and to a lesser degree Arabs—generally enjoyed greater access to food and wealth as urban-based merchant capitalists who had correspondingly superior connections to transport, financial, and communication services, as well as schooling opportunities and kin-support systems that underpinned successful business networks spanning large regions of the world. On the other hand, Mwanza’s Africans had generational roots in

subsistence/peasant farming and migrant labor, and many were recent arrivals in the city whose connections with kin living elsewhere were weakened by high transport costs. Because of their relative poverty and diminishing support networks, most Africans had fewer opportunities to exchange goods or services for food and, likewise, were at greater risk of experiencing chronic hunger.

Recognizing the social basis of this disparity, I turned to economist Amartya Sen's work because he is known for his simple, widely applicable "entitlement approach," which asks how social relations determine who goes hungry (Sen 1977, 1981; Dreze and Sen 1989).ⁱⁱⁱ Sen's entitlement approach is built on the idea that in market economies one's success in obtaining food is directly related to one's lawful ownership—via production, exchange or transfer—of a tangible or intangible commodity that can be exchanged for food. Simply stated one's exchange possibilities and hunger are inversely related—the risk of experiencing hunger increases as one's opportunities to exchange one's resources decreases. Sen asserts that this is especially true if one lacks opportunities to acquire food from what he refers to as "non-entitlement transfers" such as charity (Sen 1981: 3).

At the time of my study approximately 400 extremely poor, largely independent girls and boys survived on Mwanza's streets. This was a largely contemporary phenomenon. Other than during famine, child poverty in Africa was rare from the late pre-colonial period to the mid 20th century, and references to street children in Tanzania, specifically, are scarce (Iliffe 1987; Hake 1977; Lugalla and Kibasa 2002). A product of region-wide socio-economic, political, and public health-related shocks that first occurred in the 1970s and 1980s, large numbers of children now live on the streets in many

African countries. The population of Tanzanian street children, in particular, also originated in this period and is estimated to have doubled from 5,000 to 10,000 between 1989 and 1993 alone (Lugalla 1995; Rajani 1993).

Living in cities throughout the world, such “homeless” or “street” children are not only the subject of an extensive literature but widely recognized as comprising a vastly heterogeneous, ill-defined group because these children survive in different cultural and environmental contexts, through wide-ranging activities, on fluctuating schedules, and under the threat of varying degrees of violence.^{iv} Some originate in cities while others migrate from the countryside. Some girls and boys are “throw aways” who were involuntarily evicted from home by their “caregivers;” others are “voluntary” runaways often pushed out by dire poverty and hunger, a lack of schooling opportunities and/or abuse.

Nine girls (see Figure 1) between the ages of 11 and 15 years and 19 boys (see Figure 2) ranging from 5 to 16 years participated in my research.^v I identified “street children” as those younger than 18 years of age who lived, slept, and foraged for food unaccompanied by any adult kin.^{vi} Try as I might to refine it, my definition proved as problematic as others’ because most of the children did not know their age, some had contact with relatives, and at least one girl described herself as being “married” to a street man. Moreover some children slept on the “streets” (at the central bus terminal, under bridges or against shop doorways), while others sought refuge at “shelters” (on the ground at the informal roadside cafes where they worked, in alleys near apartments in which they washed floors, or on the cement veranda at the local street-children’s center).

Further complicating my definitional challenges was that none of the 28 children in

Figure 1. Street Girls

Name	Age	Ethnic affiliation	Region of origin	Kin on streets	Reason on streets	Years in town
Adelina	11	Sukuma	Mwanza		abandoned	0.5
Dotti	13	Sukuma	Mwanza		orphaned	2
Jane	13	Haya	Kagera		orphaned	
Josie	15	Haya	Kagera		ran away	0.5
Leah	16	Sukuma	Mwanza		abusive stepmother	5
Lucy	14	Haya	Mwanza		abusive parents	1
Mariam	13	Sukuma	Mwanza	brother	abusive father	3
Pina	13	Haya	Kagera		abusive stepfather	0.5
Regina	15	Sukuma	Shinyanga		abused as housegirl	1

Table 2. Street Boys

Name	Age	Ethnic affiliation	Region of origin	Kin on streets	Reason on streets	Years in town
Ciano	16	Sukuma	Mwanza		abused	1.5
Emma	10	Sukuma	Tabora		abusive stepfather	1
Ibrahim	11	Kerewe	Mwanza			
Iddi	10	Sukuma	Mwanza			3
John	12	Kuria	Mara		abusive father	1
Joseph	14	Sukuma	Kagera		came to town to work	
Juma	8	Sukuma	Mwanza	brother	orphaned	
Kato	6	Sukuma	Mwanza		abusive father	1
Kessy	5	Sukuma	Mwanza		orphaned	5
Lucas	14	Haya	Kagera		orphaned	1
Nuru	16	Swahili	Coast			1
Nyakato	14	Jita	Mara		ran away	2
Ramadhan	10	Sukuma	Mwanza		abandoned	
Robert	12	Rangi	Mwanza		orphaned	0.1
Salum	16	Sukuma	Mwanza			
Samson	14	Sukuma	Mwanza			1
Steven	12	Sukuma	Mwanza			
Sweddy	15	Sukuma	Mwanza			1
Theo	11	Nyamwezi	Tabora		abusive stepmother	0.5

this study self-identified as a “street” child. Instead they asserted that this was simply a temporary event in their lives and that “genuine” street children were always much worse off, more completely alone and/or more permanently homeless. In spite of these definitional challenges, all of the children in my Mwanza sample were severely impoverished and responsible for their own survival, and should not be confused with either those who sold cigarettes, candy or snacks on the streets to help bolster their families’ incomes or those who played in the alleys, open sewers, and garbage heaps because their families could not afford to send them to school or to provide them with alternative amusement.

I also encountered methodological problems at the outset of my study because the children initially resisted interacting with me. Much of this fear stemmed from police, *sungusungu* (neighborhood vigilante groups), and military “round-ups”—intermittent sweeps or “Back to the Land” campaigns that since 1920 were the official answer to urban poverty throughout the country. These rural repatriation drives, legitimized by law^{vii} and sometimes undertaken violently, involved herding into trucks Mwanza’s visibly destitute. These people, often comprised of street adults suffering from leprosy, epilepsy, or blindness, were then released in the countryside on the presupposition that they would take up farming and contribute to the nation’s food supply.^{viii}

Prior to beginning my research, my encounters with these children, recognizable by their tattered clothing and/or disease- or parasite-ravaged bodies, as well as their constant entreaties for food or money, were uncomfortable and brief. Yet I soon learned that in spite of the children’s desperate situations one thing that they yearned for was respect, which at the earliest stages of any social interaction is most explicitly expressed among

the Kiswahili speakers of East Africa through a vast repertoire of greetings. By way of greeting-based inquiries into their health and goings-on around town, I developed a personal rapport with several boys. In addition my daily visits to a local street-children's support center,^{ix} which became a central meeting place for me and my research assistants,^x also facilitated my contacts and acquaintances with these children.^{xi}

There were many reasons why these children were on the streets. Locals often blamed the attraction posed by the city's schools and job opportunities, but the children themselves described the reasons they had moved onto the streets as related to changing social obligations among family members, AIDS, and hunger. For instance familial commitments had been changing as Tanzanians, like people in many other parts of the world, began to engage in sexual relations with more partners over time and consequently had more children with different mates. Personal choice, job-related migration, and/or poverty led some people to view both their sexual and parenting partnerships as temporary, resulting in child-rearing responsibilities that were once shared to varying degrees by both men and women, to become largely the obligation of women. Women's inferior status often left them with less wealth and education and in poorer health than men—all of which presented women with greater obstacles to properly caring and advocating for their children (Potash 1995; Karanja 1994; Nelson 1978, 1979; Abrahams 1981; TGNP 1993; Kilbride and Kilbride 1990; White 1990; Lovett 1989). It was within this familial context that some children described being forced out of their homes. Some were singled-out from among their siblings and chased away because they were disliked. Others decided to leave on their own because destitution had stretched the children's caregiver(s) beyond their capabilities to nurture them. Eleven of the 28 children said that

they were victims of sexual, physical and/or emotional abuse, and a few had barely escaped brutal machete attacks or beatings by a drunken father, an abusive step-parent or a parent's spiteful lover (also see Howard and Millard 1997; Kilbride and Kilbride 1990; Bledsoe 1980; Varkevisser 1973).

The HIV/AIDS pandemic that has hit Sub-Saharan Africa so hard also took its toll on many of these children as attention, food, and other scant resources were diverted from them to family members who were ill, forcing some children to seek their survival elsewhere. AIDS-related deaths were on the rise in Tanzania especially in neighboring Kagera region, the home to an estimated 72,000 orphans by 1994—and the area from which many of Mwanza's street children originated (The Daily News, March 26, 1994). Once orphaned children were sometimes kicked-out of their surviving or new caregivers' homes because these adults found it too difficult to cope with the additional childcare and/or financial demands. Some orphans ran away because they were considered less entitled to household food and other resources than their caregivers' biological children (also see Barnett and Blaikie 1992; Whyte 1995; Hunter 2003)

Hunger also was often claimed by the girls and boys as a reason they took to Mwanza's streets. Some children explained that they went hungry because their single or divorced mothers had little money to buy food, especially any food that tasted good, was nutritious or of a wide variety. Eight-year-old Juma explained that he preferred rice over ugali (maize-meal porridge, and a Tanzanian main staple) because “at home ... I ate ugali and dagaa (tiny lake sardines) every day until I was sick of it.” In other cases the children's caregivers were too poor to provide them with food. Robert, 12 years old, recounted that “after my parents died I was taken to live with my aunt. She didn't have

work and raised me only by luck. She would beg for food from her neighbors and friends, but it was never enough.” Not surprisingly more than half of the 122 street children interviewed in another street-children’s study in Mwanza also cited “hunger” as a primary reason they left home (Rajani and Kudrati 1994:3).

The anthropological literature on children clearly shows that throughout the world there are a “plurality of childhoods ... stratified by class, age, gender and ethnicity, by urban or rural locations and by disability and health” (Jenks 1996:121-2; see also Seabrook 2001; Blanc 1994; Vreeman 1992; Reynolds 1991; Prout and James 1990; and Aries 1962). Numerous cultural models of childhood differ from many present-day, North American or Western European middle-class ones. For instance many African children often begin to work at an earlier age and commonly spend lengthier periods of time at a greater distance from their natal homes (see Panter-Brick 2000; Rwezaura 1998; Harkness and Super 1991; Reynolds 1991; Varkevisser 1973). In 1993-94 many people in Mwanza appeared to hold this same view of childhood. I often saw four- or five-year-old children caring for younger siblings outside their houses or apartment flats. Very young girls helped their mothers pick impurities out of rice and rinse laundry; boys corralled wayward chickens and tended to goats or cows staked in their yards. Explained 42-year-old Rose, a mother of 10, “Even before the children are old enough to go to school they learn their responsibilities.” According to her, when they were young all of her children had carried groceries, swept the compound, washed cooking pots, and collected water because “even when their hands are little they can do many things.”

Yet at the same time, argues laws scholar Bart Rwezaura, this image of child-as-laborer has changed and expanded so that in diverse situations throughout contemporary

Africa there are many “competing images” of childhood (1998: 253). I witnessed this in Mwanza. At the time of my study there were upper-income families who proudly sent their children to boarding schools in other parts of Tanzania, neighboring Kenya or India with the expectation that they would *work hard for good grades*, get well-paying jobs, and eventually support their parents in their old age. Middle-income families routinely sent their children to local schools, as well as expected them to *labor to meet the daily domestic demands of the household*. Many poor caregivers could not afford to send their children to school at all and instead sent them to wealthier families in Mwanza or elsewhere to *work as household, farm, and business laborers*. Rwezaura emphasizes that “the decision to give away children as labour is not always self-evident or taken without a heavy heart ... [some believe] this to be a traditional practice, others do so out of economic necessity” (1998: 258).^{xii}

During my research in Mwanza I learned that the association of children with work was very strong and some of the city’s residents viewed the street children disdainfully as lazy escapees of rural village life. A middle-aged Asian pharmacist sputtered that the children “believe that life here [in town] is easy [and] they come here to escape their chores.” I learned that in the eyes of the general public, most of the street children were viewed as old enough and apparently healthy enough to work to support themselves—as opposed to requiring charity to survive. Explained an approximately fifty-year-old Asian woman, who managed a small dry-goods shop,

I see so many of the children washing taxis. I know they can work. Very few are lepers. If they want to sweep the doorway [to the shop] I will give them a

few shillings. But when they beg I just laugh.... If they want to work, there is work.

Mwanza's politics of hunger were played out in this cultural context wherein street children's food-acquisition activities shaped and were shaped by the meanings people associated with childhood and work. For instance casual employment in a relatively wide variety of jobs was the primary means through which many of the older boys, ranging in age from 10 to 16, tried to survive. But finding work was difficult, which lent such an accomplishment a correspondingly high level of street credit. While colonial-era laws that were still on the books restricted the employment of children (to protect them from harm and abuse, to discourage children from coming to town, and to emphasize the unemployability of independent children), it was the widely held stereotype of street boys as thieves that left open to them only a few very low-paying, casual, one-time jobs in which they could be closely supervised and did not have any responsibility over objects of any value (Lugalla 1995; Coppock 1951). Boys washed taxis and cars, swept storefronts, and scrubbed laundry or floors in local homes. The boys also labored in the food trade scouring cooking pots and hauling water for food-stand operators. Some entrepreneurial boys risked cuts and tetanus as they wandered barefoot through roadside trash heaps collecting recyclable valuables to sell, such as unburned pieces of charcoal and tobacco from discarded cigarette butts. Others scavenged to gather insects, small fish, and food waste to sell as bait to fishermen. Some boys fished from shore and then sold their catch to roadside vendors to fry and resell. Still others roamed the streets selling penny candy, gum, peanuts, and cigarettes or worked in roadside stands selling soda and sundries.

The children's work opportunities also were governed by local meanings associated with gender. Even fewer jobs were deemed as suitable for the girls and this situation held important implications not only for the girls' street-credit status, but their visibility in public as well. My first impressions in Mwanza were that street boys drastically outnumbered girls, but the ratio of boys to girls was narrower than appearances implied because many of the city's street girls, like elsewhere in Tanzania, cooked, cleaned, and cared for children in more hidden settings as housegirls (Lugalla and Kibasa 2003). Five of the nine girls in my study mentioned previously working as housegirls. While all housegirls were vulnerable to their employer's exploitation, street girls were particularly susceptible because they had neither any supportive kin to return home to nor any other caring authority to which they could voice complaints.^{xiii} Aside from suffering from chronic malaria (from sleeping without mosquito nets), burns, breathing problems, and upper-respiratory infections (from tending smokey fires and sleeping on cold, bare floors), and malnourishment (from eating only leftovers) some girls reported being pressured to have sex with their male employer or his "friends" (Onyango 1983; Stichter 1985; Sheikh-Hashim 1990; Rajani and Kudrati 1994).

Yet while they often were exploited, the street girls in my study were not powerless victims. They cited intentionally quitting their jobs without notice or manipulating employer's sexual demands to acquire money or other gifts—or just to spite the "mother of the house" (TGNP 1993: 69). In short the former housegirls included in my sample found life on the streets preferable to working under such dire conditions, and those who left such jobs to move onto the streets were often welcomed by small groups of existing street girls and accorded the street-credit status commensurate with making such a bold

move.

In addition there is a long history of independent females in African urban areas being viewed as prostitutes and this stereotype certainly hurt the street girls' job prospects (White 1990; Robertson 1995). The girls also feared pursuing the same income-generating activities undertaken by the boys, such as washing cars and selling peanuts, candy, and cigarettes because they believed that the boys would harass them and generally "sabotage" their efforts (Plummer 1994: 86). Working at local food stands was just about the only place outside of domestic service where they could get jobs. "I wash cooking pots and utensils and fetch water," recounted eleven-year-old Adelina. "[Some of] the money I get from Mama Nitilie is for helping her carry the pots and utensils from her stand to her home on Bugando hill."

Because of the severe limitations getting work, the girls often were forced to survive via sexual exchanges. While none of the boys in this study acknowledged exchanging sex for food, some of the youngest street boys in Mwanza and elsewhere in Tanzania were known to have done so. This is not to say that older boys never had sex or did not exchange sex for food or money. Boys in Mwanza had consensual sex with and raped the street girls, in addition to practicing kunyenga (slang for non-consensual, anal-penetrative sex) among themselves as a group-member initiation rite (Rajani and Kudrati 1996; Lugalla and Mbwambo 2002; Lockhart 2002; Lugalla and Kibasa 2003). But sex-for-food practices did not appear to be a regular occurrence among the self-provisioning practices of older boys in Mwanza or other places in Tanzania (Muhimbo Mdoe and Fred Nyiti^{xiv}, personal communication; Lugalla 1995).

Girls more commonly relied on a complex variety of sexual relationships ranging

from quick one-time encounters with strangers to long-term “boyfriends.”^{xv} Fifteen-year-old Josie described how “[some]times I go directly to have sex with my boyfriend, John, and he gives me money to buy food, soda and juice.” Girls like Josie found sex a viable survival strategy because it required neither a formal education nor a high input of capital. Yet their “survival sex” activities could take different forms thereby blurring the conceptual boundaries between quick commercial/exploitative sex and other types of friendships and nurturing partnerships. Most of these girls had what they called a “rafiki or marafiki” (literally “friend” or “friends” but also in this case “boyfriend” or “boyfriends”)^{xvi} with whom they exchanged affection, protection, sex, and food. These males usually were young (under 18) and poor and, even though they were not themselves impoverished or homeless, they were in no financial position to permanently house, feed and/or clothe the girls.

In other instances girls exchanged sex with street boys as well as adult males, some of whom also lived on the streets. But while these partnerships could be long-term they also appeared to be based largely on food- or money-for-sex transactions. The other adult men with whom these girls had sexual encounters were often complete strangers who accosted and frightened the girls into having sex with them. Given the girls’ lack of bargaining power and the limited financial resources of their partners, one sexual encounter usually generated only enough food to sustain the girls for the moment—if the girls were given anything at all. For all of these reasons the girls’ sex-for-food relationships could involve an intricate mixture of dependency, support, affection, threats and exploitation.^{xvii} They also involved a continuum of street credit, social status and power. On the one hand, the girls’ relative assertiveness and status were apparent in their

ability to command money or food in exchange for sex, whether from a “boyfriend” or one-time partner. On the other hand, their powerlessness, worthlessness, and hopelessness were apparent in that they often went uncompensated for consensual sex or were forcibly raped (also see Bamurange 1998).^{xviii} In sum the public’ stereotype of street girls as prostitutes was easily self-replicating; the public restricted their survival strategies to such an extent that the girls had to engage in casual sex work to survive.

Besides casual employment and sex work, Mwanza’s street boys and girls also engaged in theft.^{xix} While theft falls outside the analytical frame of Sen’s entitlement approach because it is illegal, I mention it here because some of the children were proficient thieves, and accorded relatively high amounts of street credit for accomplishing these brazen acts, even though they stole things to a much lesser extent than their widespread stereotype might imply. The girls often described stealing food and clothing. The boys often told of, or were seen, stealing oranges, carrots, or tomatoes food from market vendors, stealthily pick-pocketing rival street boys while they slept, violently beating and/or robbing one another or grabbing car parts off of, or valuables from within, vehicles belonging to careless drivers. Yet most of the children described theft as a safety net used only when they were experiencing dire hunger; they knew that if they were caught they risked a brutal—even fatal—beating in the name of mob “justice” or arrest and then months languishing in jail.^{xx}

Local meanings associated with childhood, work, and street “girl” as opposed to “boy” created clear gradients of power that influenced these children’s entitlement to food and their corresponding street credit, both among one another and within the wider community. Twelve-year-old John was given special street credit among his peers for this

thieving exploits because, as one younger boy explained, “He always gets what he wants, nobody hits him ... and sometimes he shares with us.” Certain older girls were held in particularly high esteem, especially among younger ones, because of their cooperation in helping the latter to secure nourishment. Older girls in Mwanza, like those elsewhere in Tanzania, sometimes offered their services if only one had to have sex to acquire enough food or money to provision the group (see also Bamurange 1998). The relatively high amounts of street credit given these girls was usually fleeting at best; however, because the girls lacked the emotional maturity needed to sustain long-term group membership without fighting over their meager resources and connections to others.

The street credit accorded the boys by the general public also varied and was often short-lived. For instance, while some of the boys were able to find repeat work from sympathetic patrons, the majority of the boys’ jobs changed from day to day. “To get food myself is very difficult because I do not have important work,” explained Theo, 11 years old. “Some days I remain unemployed the entire day and just drink water and sleep.” Still a few boys and girls were successful in acquiring more durable street credit and status in the community. For example Leah, 16, had diverse employment opportunities, had lived in Mwanza for many years, and knew many community contacts. She acquired food and money through her sexual relationships with several regular partners and ate at the food stands in return for carrying water and cleaning cooking pots. “Getting food is easy” she said. Yet Leah’s situation was unique. She had lived in Mwanza for five years, which was longer than any of the other children included in this study.

As a whole both street boys and girls suffered at the hands of the local community,

but the girls had even fewer opportunities to gain entitlement to food. Almost all of the children depended on food-stand operators and roadside-snack vendors for their “meals,” although many of the boys and girls in my sample ate a daily snack (usually a banana or some biscuits/crackers) distributed by the street-children’s support center. Yet for all of their efforts the girls, in particular, usually acquired little by way of quantity, quality or variety of food. Their diets were comprised largely of ugali,^{xxi} uji (watery gruel made from millet, wheat, maize, or cassava flour) or rice with a side relish of kidney beans and/or spinach (or other cooked vegetable leaves). As a group the boys ate a slightly better diet because they could afford a little more animal protein such as fish, chicken, and goat meat. Six of the boys who attended school ate school lunches. They also were given a simple evening meal of beans and rice cooked at the local street-children’s center because their schooling left them little time to earn extra money. In addition several boys ate at the houses or apartments in which they washed clothes and scrubbed floors. If the girls scavenged raw pieces of dried cassava root or caught grasshoppers they roasted them over bits of charcoal found in waste heaps, but none of them regularly cooked food. Although the quantity and the quality of the food varied, the girls and boys employed at the food-stands commonly were successful in eating at least two meals a day, which was a relative bonanza for some of the children. As fifteen-year-old Regina stated, “I get more food from the stand than I did at home in Sengerema.”

Still there was a particular way in which some of Mwanza’s street youth obtained food—via *private charity*—that was key in delineating the street-credit economy and power gradients therein. The children’s experiences with private charity also hold important implications for expanding the utility of Sen’s entitlement approach. For

example begging for alms was the mainstay of the youngest street boys. Five-year-old Kessy made daily visits to his benefactors at a gas stations, a roadside café, and a large newspaper stand—all in hope of collecting a ten-shilling piece or two (US\$ 0.02 or 0.04). Due to their ages Kessy and his best friend and nearly constant companion, six-year-old Kato, were both provided a free daily meal of rice and beans at the expense of the local street-children's center. But they regularly supplemented their diet with peanuts and penny candies that they bought with money collected along their donor circuits, as well as with donations that they acquired from a few roadside snack vendors.

Many of the older boys also begged for alms from people they met on the streets, especially any visiting expatriates tourists, researchers, or staff overseeing development projects in greater Mwanza region. Some of the boys were very accomplished at pulling at the heartstrings of these visitors, many of whom may had seen aid-agency advertisements portraying “typical” dirty, hungry, “Third World” children. For this audience the boys made pitifully sad facial expressions and used body language conveying hunger. One to two hours of begging outside the town's largest western-style hotel or the popular ice cream shop could earn a boy anywhere from 100 to 1,000 shillings (US \$0.20-2) and it could take all day to earn that by selling candy on the streets. “Some boys don't like to work hard,” explained 11-year-old Ibrahim, “so they beg instead.” Two boys also ate meals and snacks offered in some of Mwanza's private kitchens as alms on Fridays, the Muslim holy day. The few boys who were regularly fed by charitable households were commonly offered pilau (spiced rice), chicken, and beef at Arab or African houses and bean-based dishes with rice, flat breads, and yogurt at Asian houses.

While the street girls tried their hand at begging, they were less likely to do so at the central expatriate hangouts in town because the boys regularly controlled this turf and the girls risked severe beatings if they attempted to beg there. Instead taxi drivers, roadside food-stand customers, and produce vendors were whom the girls commonly approached with their pleas for alms. Yet again the street girls were less successful than the boys in gaining access to charity because females are so widely associated with food in Mwanza, as well as throughout much of Sub-Saharan Africa. Females grow, prepare, and distribute the vast majority of the food on the continent and street girls were commonly viewed as idle-but-capable food provisioners—and certainly not those who were suitable for charity (Raikes 1988). Mama Gina, approximately thirty-five and a banana vendor in Soko Kuu, underscored this point for me as three street girls passed by her table, “They [the girls] come here to have sex with the market laborers. Then they get sick. It is easy for girls to get started in the food trade. They can sell bananas, mangoes, tomatoes. I did. They just eat their capital.”

In thinking over the boys’ and girls’ various experiences with begging, I wondered how their dependence on private charity meshed with Sen’s entitlement approach. Sen writes in Poverty and Famines that once people lose entitlement to food—that is lose their ability to exchange their resources for food—starvation is inevitable unless they can acquire food from “*non-entitlement transfers (e.g., charity)*” (1981: 3, emphasis mine). Why does Sen consider private (non-state-sponsored) charity as non-entitlement transfers? Two reasons come to mind: (1) With his emphasis on entitlement as based on an *exchange* of resources between parties, and with his use of the term “transfer” in association with charity, perhaps Sen views private charity as involving only a one-way

conveyance between parties as opposed to a two-way exchange; and/or (2) given the entitlement approach's emphasis on the legal ownership of one's resources, perhaps Sen does not view charity as legal.

But is private charity only a one-way transfer as Sen seems to imply? To answer this question one needs to delve deeper into the meanings alms-givers assigned their activities. While it was often impossible to authenticate donors' goals in offering charity to others, I offer an example as to what compels alms-givers to extend charity to street children. An Arab family, comprised of Mama Mahmedi and her grown children, sought religious favor through their charitable deeds in which they had shared their limited resources over the years with nearly 20 street boys, whom they circumcised, converted to Islam, and sent to school so that the family would "prosper in the eyes of God." I believe that the blessings/salvation these alms-givers sought are another form of street credit that formed a key component of the *two-way exchanges* taking place between alms-givers and street children. Alms-givers offered primarily tangible commodities (food, money, clothing, shelter and/or education) and street-child recipients provided largely intangible ones (opportunities to acquire street-credit for helping the needy, or religious favor in this life or salvation in the after-life, and/or perhaps even a link to inexpensive labor). If Sen views charity as falling outside the entitlement approach because it appears to be only a one-way transfer that is provided voluntarily and spontaneously by those who are genuinely concerned, the experiences of some of Mwanza's street children demonstrate otherwise. These incidents also support what French sociologist Marcel Mauss asserted in his classic text *The Gift*: "Prestations which are in theory voluntary, disinterested and spontaneous are in fact obligatory and interested" (1967: 1).

In regard to the other reason that Sen might avoid including charity as an exchange entitlement, that is because of charity's other-than-legal status, development economist Siddiq Osmani argues that in Sen's entitlement approach

... the transfer component ... includes only those transfers to which a person is legally entitled—for example, social security provisions of the state. ... [a]lthough there is nothing illegal about receiving charity, it is not counted as part of [one's possibilities of exchange] for the simple reason that one is not legally entitled to charity, whatever may be one's view about the poor's moral entitlement to it (1995: 255).

Yet while Sen and Osmani make evident their assessments of a legal and non-legal entitlement, what remains confusingly vague are their assumptions about private charity that make it irrelevant to the entitlement approach. I believe that this may stem from their more quantitative economic approach which may inadvertently contribute to their glossing-over of vital considerations of both *time* and *social process* in their characterizations of charitable goods and exchanges. Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai's (1986) view of the "social life of things" is particularly useful in revealing the temporal and processual aspects underlying the direct relationship between private charity and many government-sanctioned entitlements. As Appadurai argues, it is typically the "phase" or historical context of an item's culture-based "career" that defines its exchangeability. In other words, removing a charitable item from its given social and historical context may cause problems in determining its real value. I believe in the same vein that removing charitable *exchanges* from their "career" trajectories also can unintentionally conceal the close relationship between private charity and legal/public/governmental entitlements (such as the social security provisions to which Osmani referred to above) because doing so erases their cultural history and

development. As demonstrated by economist Robert William Fogel (1999, 2000), legal entitlements in the United States and in other industrial countries very often are born out of wide-ranging, non-legal, private charitable exchanges employed and promoted by religious or other morally motivated organizations remonstrating and advocating for political change. Key to my extension of Sen's entitlement approach, therefore, is the line of reasoning that in the instant a particular non-legal form of charity (such as faith-based organizations' food hand-outs to the un- or under-employed, for example) becomes legal (as in the form of government-subsidized food stamps) vast numbers of people may already depend on it for food and their survival (see Flynn 2005; Fogel 1999, 2000).

This research opens up many new questions. What exactly is the nature of charitable exchange? If the acquisition of certain kinds of street credit is a motivation to alms-donors, how strong is this non-monetary incentive and how can it be further encouraged? To what extent are cast-off, derided and "marginalized" children (and adults) actually integral to the functioning of the "mainstream" status- and salvation-oriented economies in other places the way that they appear to be in Mwanza? Do the same processes that fueled the transformation of charity-based protest movements into governmental realignments and legally sanctioned entitlements in many industrial countries work in the same way in the world's poorest countries that are undergoing vast political-economic change? Through an understanding of the full range of meanings that people in Mwanza and elsewhere assign to their alms-giving activities, I believe that advocates and policymakers worldwide can more effectively facilitate destitute persons' fulfillment of their food and other basic needs through increased access to private charity. Having said this, I do find it very troubling that we need to develop opportunities for the

hungry to gain entitlement through private charity rather than through state-guaranteed entitlement programs. It is this emphasis on gifts instead of rights that is the problem (Poppendieck 1998). But given the trend toward a widening gap between the haves and have-nots both in cities such as Mwanza (and in other parts of the world), coupled with ongoing reductions in public-service offerings, the reality of the situation suggests that more rather than fewer people will be seeking charity in attempts to relieve their hunger, at least in the near future, and access to private charity *must* be part of advocates' and policymakers' assessments of hunger relief, food entitlement, and the local politics of hunger.

Notes

ⁱ This study was set in Mwanza, Tanzania, during 10 months of anthropological research in 1993-94 and several weeks in 2000. In 1993 Mwanza had a rapidly increasing population estimated at nearly 277,000 that was predicted to exceed 1.3 million by 2011 (Mwanza Master Plan (1992-2012) 1992).[#] The city is situated on the southeastern shore of equatorial Lake Victoria, and is an industrial center of fish, textile and leather processing, soda bottling, and furniture building. It also is a governmental seat and transportation hub of the greater Lake Zone.

ⁱⁱ The umbrella term "Asian" is commonly used by the people of East Africa to refer to people of Indian or Pakistani ancestry, including Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, and those belonging to related sects. There were significant differences among Mwanza's Asians in regard to Hindu/Muslim splits, allegiance to the Aga Khan, and issues

pertaining to the historical partition of India. Yet the strong bonds of ethnicity, place of origin, and a shared history of “otherness” in relation to the Africans and Europeans in East Africa had contributed to the formation of a common Asian identity in Mwanza (Bienen 1974; Mangat 1969).

ⁱⁱⁱ Of course there are important differences between “famine,” which Sen’s early work addresses specifically, and the “chronic hunger” that he takes up later (see Sen 1987)—and that I witnessed among Mwanza’s street children (see Flynn 2005). Yet the approach’s broad applicability rests on the way it complements the “food shortage” and “political crisis” schools of thought (Messer and Shipton 2002: 229; Devereux 2001: 248).

^{iv} See for example Dallape 1987; Iliffe 1987; Hardoy and Satterwhite 1989; Swart 1990; Reynolds 1991; United Nations 1991; Gunther 1992; Williams 1993; Blunt 1994; Rajani and Kudrati 1994, 1996; Scheper-Hughes and Hoffman 1994, Ennew 1994a, 1994b; Campos, Raffaelli, Ude et al. 1994; Lugalla 1995; Mulders 1995; Save The Children Fund (UK) 1997; Hecht 1998; Marquez 1999; Lugalla and Kibasa 2002, 2003.

^v All of these children were African (as opposed to Asian or Arab) and 17 claimed affiliation (through either one or both parents) to the regionally predominant Sukuma. The others associated themselves with Haya, Jita, Rangi, Kuria, Nyamwezi or Kerewe groups. All of these children came from areas outside of the city, and some had originated from as far away as Kenya and Burundi. In the past decade the situation has

changed and more children from Mwanza's slums are moving onto the streets.

^{vi} Laws defining the age of majority in Tanzania are inconsistent. I chose this age based on the outreach practices of a local street-children center, the *kuleana* Center for Children's Rights.

^{vii} This included laws such as the Townships (Removal of Undesirable Persons) Ordinance of 1944, the Kilimo cha Kufa na Kupona (Agriculture for Life or Death) campaign of 1974–75, and those associated with the Nguvu Kazi (Hard Work) Act of 1983. Under the law destitute people could be identified as “loiterers” and “criminals,” and trucked out into the countryside under the premise that they would work growing crops. Despite their long history these campaigns usually failed to accomplish anything more than temporarily clearing the streets. As soon as they were dropped off in the rural areas, and given any meager food rations and/or cash to begin their new lives, many of the “repatriated” began to make their way back to town (Heijnen 1968; Bryceson 1990; Lugalla 1995).

^{viii} For more on Mwanza's street adults and their food-provisioning practices see Flynn 1999.

^{ix} The *kuleana* Center for Children's Rights was a nongovernmental agency offering medical, legal, educational, and nutritional support to approximately 120 of Mwanza's street children.

^x Several secondary-school graduates assisted me at various times with my larger research, of which our work with street children was only a part. These were Philbert Bugeke, Agripina Cosmos, Gilbert Maganga and Emma John.

^{xi} The 28 children included in this study were formally interviewed once to learn of the children's life histories and food-acquisition activities either by me or one of my assistants. Yet because I was in regular contact with many of them, I was able to reconfirm and collect new information over the course of weeks and even months, depending on the amount of time these very mobile boys and girls spent in town. I acquired much of the information about the boys, in particular, during countless informal discussions with them while walking either individually or in groups through the streets or marketplaces, while sitting near the bus stand, ferry ports or post office, or while hanging around outside of my house or the street children's center. My assistants' interviews and my long conversations with some of the center's staff members also helped me acquire information from the shyest boys and many of the girls.

^{xii} Contemporary child labor is complicated further because children are socialized to respect authority in ways that made voicing complaints both inappropriate and an invitation for corporal punishment, which is practiced widely in Tanzanian homes and schools. In addition Tanzanian parents, like others, may be powerless to voice grievances against their children's employers not only because of local customs concerning disciplinary relationships between child laborers and their employers, but because of the

parental need for income (Rwezaura 1998; Bledsoe 1990; Thompson 1971; Blanchet 1996).

^{xiii} Employing girls under the age of 12 is illegal under the Tanzanian Employment Ordinance (TGNP 1993; Shaidi 1991). Yet there is a very fine line separating paid employment from the regular domestic responsibilities of girls. This situation makes it difficult for labor officers to prove that an arrangement is illegal, especially if both the housegirl and the employing family can verify even distant kinship connections between them (Sheikh-Hashim 1990). Anecdotal evidence suggests that some of the authorities appointed to enforce these child-labor laws illegally employ housegirls themselves.

^{xiv} Muhimbo Mdoe and Fred Nyiti were senior educators with Street Kids International in Dar es Salaam.

^{xv} Acquiring accurate information from the girls about their sexuality was difficult. Four of the 9 street girls described exchanging sex for food or money, although it was very likely that all of them did (Mary Plummer, kuleana staff member, personal communication, February 28, 1994). Some might have felt uncomfortable discussing it given the stigma prostitution carried, others might not have identified their sexual encounters as a direct means through which they acquired food, and a few might not have exchanged sex for food on a regular basis. Moreover, the girls may have lacked the language with which to analyze what was happening to them in their sexual relationships. On the whole, however, sex was an integral part of their survival.

^{xvi} In Mwanza the plural form of rafiki was commonly pronounced without the prefix “ma” that distinguished the plural form marafiki (friends, boy/girlfriends) from the singular form of the word rafiki (friend, boy/girlfriend) among other Swahili speakers in Tanzania.

^{xvii} The girls sex-for-food exchanges appeared to be a bitter twist on the exchanges of money or gifts that are integral to many adult marriage and sexual relationships in Africa and elsewhere around the world, except these girls were forced into these exploitative relationships at a much younger age, and neither gained economic advantage from these exchanges nor fulfilled their culturally sanctioned roles as provisioners of food.

^{xviii} The girls’ dependency on sexual exchanges to acquire food also left them vulnerable to the physical and emotional difficulties of unplanned pregnancies, botched or back-alley abortions, miscarriages, premature deliveries and poorly spaced births. They also suffered repeatedly from beatings and rape. Not only were the girls’ physically immature bodies more susceptible to sex-related injuries, but these injuries made them more vulnerable to HIV infection. All unprotected sexual activities made them susceptible to sexually transmitted diseases and as many as 20% of the young people living in Mwanza were infected with HIV (Rajani and Kudrati 1994). These girls and their partners also had little access to protective condoms, and when they did the girls lacked the negotiating power to encourage males to wear them.

^{xix} At the same time what constituted “theft” was hardly clear-cut among Mwanza’s residents. Street children could be seen scavenging spilled or discarded foods at marketplace peripheries. At one of the local markets street girls competed with the poor elderly women employed to collect dagaa, maize and bits of dried cassava that fell to the ground from their deteriorating burlap sacks during the rearranging of inventory. The women angrily branded the scavenging girls as “thieves” because the children “stole” the goods the women collected for pay. Yet the girls were tolerated by some vendors because the foragers cleaned the area at no cost. The girls often gave their uncooked booty to sympathetic “Mama Nitilies,” who either cooked it for the girls or gave them some other food in return. Some people explained that out of sympathy they ignored thefts-in-progress, especially by the very youngest street children, or else took the opportunity to educate the children on the proper way to beg.

^{xx} Street boys also were regularly used by adult criminals to commit crimes. If caught by the police, the children suffered because the court and prison systems were poorly equipped to deal with the children in an appropriate and timely manner. In 1993 there was a months-long backlog in Mwanza’s courts of the hearing of children’s cases. This left children languishing in the filthy, overcrowded municipal Butimba jail. Once their cases made it to court, youths were often poorly represented in court hearings and given adult sentences involving corporal punishment. Long-term confinement in the same jail cells as adults was common and resulted in children suffering unbearable trauma from physical and sexual abuse at the hands of their adult cell mates (Shaidi 1991).

^{xxi} In 1993-94 Tanzanians lacked any broad, systematic, class-specific patterns of food consumption or in other words what anthropologist Jack Goody (1982) refers to as “high” and “low” cuisines (see also Bourdieu 1984). In spite of some regional variation (cooked bananas in the far northwest and rice along the Indian Ocean coast) ugali is what made a Tanzanian meal a meal. Yet there were several grades of maize flour that could form the basis of the ugali and the more processed maize flours were viewed by locals as “smoother,” “sweeter,” “whiter” and more desirable. They also were more expensive. So the children often ate darker grades of ugali or more commonly even darker millet-based uji, which was widely recognized as “less pure,” “the color of soil” and “poor people’s food.”

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