

Elisabeth Wesseling

Elisabeth Wesseling is affiliated as an Associate Professor to the Department of Literature and Art, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Maastricht University, The Netherlands.
E-mail: lies.wesseling@LK.Unimaas.nl.

In loco parentis: The adoption plot in Dutch-language colonial children's books

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This article analyzes the "adoption plot" in colonial children's literature from the 1950s, which narrates how black children are socialized into Western civilization. Many children's books about the colonies have been inspired by missionary stories dating from the 1900s about the conversion of black children. Children's literature generalizes these stories into abstract symbolic structures that can be easily reiterated in other contexts. The enduring relevance of the adoption plot is not to be underestimated. We still tend to conceive of Third World children as essentially parentless and as such, up for adoption by First World citizens, as the imagery of international relief demonstrates. **Key words:** postcolonialism, children's literature, adoption plot, childhood images, Congo literature.

Children's literature and postcolonial theory

(White) children and (black) savages have a lot in common, or at least that is what one used to think. From the first journeys of discovery, the so-called "primitive races" were conceived of as children and vice versa. Western children were either idealized as noble savages best left at peace, or demonized as ferocious creatures in need of taming. Seminal postcolonial critics have pointed out that the cultural construction of childhood is crucial to the colonial enterprise (Bhaba 1985, Ashcroft 1989). Jo-Ann Wallace even goes so far as to state that the invention of childhood in early modernity was a necessary precondition of imperialism and colonialism (Wallace 1994). The idea that the primitive races were still in the stage of childhood and needed the strong hand of white rulers in order to "mature," inspired and legitimized the annexation of overseas territories.

In view of such a general consensus, it is quite surprising that postcolonial criticism has barely dwelt on children's literature, one of our oldest technologies for constructing images of childhood. Although some excellent studies have been written about the role of children's literature in the (de-)colonization of culture (Bradford 2001, Kutzer 2000, MacCann 1998, McGillis 2000, Nodelman 1992, Sands-O'Connor 2007, Scutter 1997), these publications do not feed back into the mainstream of postcolonial criticism.¹ This is unfortunate, for children's literature strongly impacts upon

stereotypical views of the colonized “other”. As instruments of socialization, children’s books play a formative role in selecting and redefining the value patterns considered worthy enough to be passed down to the next generation. From an historical point of view, this implies that children’s books may inform us about the pervasiveness and longevity of white supremacist ideologies. While the aesthetic qualities of children’s literature may vary, its cultural impact remains significant. Although nowadays fewer adults regularly read literature, since the turn of the twentieth century all citizens of Western European countries have attended primary school, where they were required to read books, both fiction and non-fiction. Children’s books are among the crucial factors that shape young people’s attitudes to (formerly) colonized peoples – attitudes which may last a lifetime. In our contemporary mass media culture, they share this function with more recent children’s media, such as radio and TV broadcasts, children’s movies and digital games. Close analysis of children’s literature may enable us to grasp the historical variability of the semiotic interrelation between white children and colonized others with greater precision and detail, rather than merely enabling us to observe upon the pervasiveness of paternalism in the abstract.

In my opinion, postcolonial criticism of children’s books should avoid the trap of bashing authors from previous eras by gleefully exposing their blind spots and prejudices, while indulging in self-serving assumptions of superior insight. Instead, I analyze children’s books from the past in order to put into historical perspective those colonialist signifying practices that have lived on into the present. As historical sources, children’s books can be of great value for a critical genealogy of the present. Like narrative fiction in general, children’s literature reworks the contradictions and anomalies inherent in social practices, transforming them into symbolic structures that transcend the specifics of time and place and can be continually reiterated as such. Children’s fiction translates certain colonial practices into symbolic structures, which may subsequently outlive the prevailing historical circumstances of their first publication, thereby enhancing the tenacity of colonialist discourse.

The adoption plot

The above assertions will be fleshed out through a case study of Dutch-language colonial children’s books from the mid-twentieth century.² My argument applies to those colonial children’s books relating to how black children become acquainted with Western civilization, most notably Christianity, i.e. to children’s books with a religious subtext.³ The colonial encounter which features native children is often cast in the shape of a more or less symbolic adoption of the black child. The colored child, at whatever colonial location, tends to be represented as essentially parentless and therefore *zu haben*. The parental authorities who exert power over native children in the colonies, most notably chiefs, witchdoctors and biological fathers, are depicted at

best as incompetent, or at their worst as superstitious, tyrannical and exploitative. Somehow they do not manage to cater to children's basic needs for food, shelter and protection. Given that these local authorities failed to live up to their status, black children were cast in the mould of orphans. Literal and/or metaphorical orphanhood divested children of their lineage, of their native traditions, in short, of their cultural heritage. They were turned into blank slates awaiting the inscription of Western culture. Cultural difference does not seem to be a barrier to full assimilation into Western civilization for these parentless or heritage-less children: they are there for the taking, and white adults should rise to the occasion by "adopting" them. After their adoption into the white man's family, these child characters develop into paragons of Western virtues, often becoming whiter than white and more Catholic than the Pope, providing white children with instructive examples. This "adoption plot" transcends the boundaries between national literatures. The symbolic structure at stake is neither specific to children's books about the Congo nor to children's literature in the Dutch language.

A case study of two Dutch-language children's books from the previous century may serve to fill out the basic contours of the adoption plot, beginning with *Dagoe, de kleine bosneger* (The Little Negro, Dagoe, 1954) by the Dutch author Anne de Vries (1904–1964). The story is set in Suriname, a former Dutch colony. This book contains a double adoption plot, in that the young hero Dagoe, a ten-year old boy, is both the subject and object of adoption. The book describes how Dagoe goes to the mission school by boat every day, together with his playmates from his village in the Suriname jungle. They are educated by a black schoolmaster who has shed most of his native habits and values. The schoolmaster wears a spotless white suit and spectacles. Most importantly, he has been converted to the Christian faith. Besides teaching his pupils elementary cognitive skills, he also acquaints them with the Bible. One day, the schoolmaster tells the parable of the Good Samaritan. This story makes a profound impression on Dagoe, because it reminds him of his deceased father who died in his efforts to save a white woman from drowning. Just like the Good Samaritan, his father demonstrated compassion towards a fellow human being not belonging to his own people.

When Dagoe returns to his village that day, he comes across a tiny boat floating down the river without an oarsman. Upon closer inspection, it turns out that the canoe shelters a little Indian baby. Dagoe, who is still under the influence of the parable of the Good Samaritan, decides to take care of the baby, even though this goes against the customs and dictates of his kinfolk. When he arrives home, he encounters nothing but anger, because the villagers consider Dagoe's intervention highly dangerous. They fear that the child is a sacrifice to the gods and is bound to inflict bad luck on their village if they decide to take him in. After a lengthy palaver, the village council decides to ward off the curse by ostracizing Dagoe. He is sent off into the

jungle all by himself and if he manages to survive the ordeal, the gods will most likely have been appeased, or so the chief believes. Meanwhile, the little Indian baby is returned to the river where it is left to float away. At this point, both the black boy and the Indian baby have essentially become parentless, cast out on the grounds of heathenish superstitions.

After some deliberation, Dagoë decides to espouse the norms and values embodied by the schoolmaster rather than the customs of his tribe. He returns to the river, saving the baby for a second time as he steers the boat in the direction of the schoolmaster's house in search of assistance. The schoolmaster praises Dagoë enthusiastically for his compassionate deed and immediately sets out to notify the Indian tribe living in the vicinity of Dagoë's discovery of the little foundling. The Indians are overjoyed by the recovery of the lost baby, rewarding Dagoë with the precious gift of a dog. The schoolmaster interprets Dagoë's work of mercy as a sign of his inner conversion and decides to baptize the young boy, renaming him "Samaritan." The boy's original name, which means "dog," or, more precisely, "sharp nose," is appropriately enough passed on to his dog. Thus, Dagoë transcended himself and the accompanying illustration clearly brings out the symbolic importance of this event.

This picture illustrates how Dagoë moves from darkness into light, literally and symbolically moving a few steps upwards to a higher stage of civilization and wisdom. The schoolmaster becomes Dagoë's new symbolic father, a worthy successor to the boy's deceased father, who trod in the footsteps of the Good Samaritan, wholly unaware. Thus, Dagoë, his biological father and his symbolic father, together form a trans-cultural, universal dynasty of compassion.

The second part of my case study pertains to *Benny Ntumba* (1951) by the Flemish author Leen van Marcke (1902–1987). This book is set in Rwanda and the Congo. It focuses on a twelve-year old black boy called Mulongu Ntumba. It celebrates the entrepreneurial spirit, i.e. the courage to leave behind your home and all that is familiar to you in order to make a better life for yourself elsewhere. These qualities have often been cited in order to substantiate the supposed superiority of the white race, which refuses to stay put, contrary to Africans, who have apparently been neither brave nor inventive enough to cross an ocean by themselves. In *Benny Ntumba*, however, the entrepreneurial spirit is attributed to a black child, who is furthermore credited with artistic genius.

Mulongu has an innate urge to create beautiful things, carving statues out of wood without any example whatsoever. Thanks to a white man's gift, he also discovers the pleasures of drawing on paper. Unfortunately, the inhabitants of his native village have no appreciation for his creative talents. The narrator makes it quite clear that this hero could never have developed into the successful artist that he eventually became had he stayed there. The local authorities, that is, the chief and the witchdoctor, are not only devoid of a feeling for art, but, even worse, they are also the corner-



Dagoe goes up to the schoolmaster's house with the Indian baby (Vries de 1954: 34).

stones of a feudal system of exploitation and slavery. They demand their share of every crop and all booty without working for it themselves, offering nothing but a fake form of protection in return. These customs are contrasted unfavorably with the ways of the whites, who offer wages in return for services rendered.⁴

Mulongu is increasingly prone to a vague sense of dissatisfaction with how things are run in his village and feels confined and restless. The boy seizes his opportunity to leave when his uncle from the Congo comes to visit by car. Unfortunately, they have a car accident on the road to Stanleyville. Mulongu is thrown out of the car and lies helplessly alongside the road, lethally wounded. At that very moment, two good Samaritans pass by in the form of two Catholic priests. They take care of Mulongu and his uncle, but because Mulongu may die any moment, they decide to baptize him, which is the symbolic form of adoption *par excellence*. Again, this symbolic adoption is consolidated by endowing Mulongu with a Christian name: Benjamin, or Benny. The priests take him to a hospital, where he is cared for by a doctor who performs an important role in the boy's life. The doctor is the first person in Benny's life who knows how to appreciate his artistic talents, the first to buy one of Benny's paintings, and also the first to teach him how to spell his new name, so that Benny may sign his own work, profiling himself as an aspiring individual. Thus, the doctor becomes a

symbolic “super parent” for Benny, offering all the care, protection and stimulation that his kinfolk are unable to provide. Clearly, Benny would have been unable to develop himself had he would not been “adopted” by white men.

As in *Dagoe*, there is no good reason why Mulongo/Benny should not fully assimilate himself into Western civilization. He does so quite effortlessly, soon followed by his parents, who also decide to leave their tribal life behind. The black child is indeed the father of the black man here, to paraphrase Wordsworth, because he has not yet been fully socialized into the customs and strictures of his native culture. However, the black child only becomes the superior of his parents after he has subjected himself to white paternal authority.

Children’s literature and contemporary neo-imperialism

The books discussed recapitulate the missionary practices of a century ago. Protestant and Catholic missionaries had a strong impact on Western images of Africa and Africans. Whereas the first explorers and settlers of overseas territories were inclined to propagate the utopian image of the noble savage, the missionaries tended to recycle the dystopian image of the ferocious savage, which was epitomized by chiefs and witchdoctors. Many missionaries reveled in dark, unsettling stories about cruel heathenish rites, including cannibalism. Evidently, the picture of the evil savage served the interests of the missionaries who were in the process of usurping the authority of the local leaders.

Both Protestant and Catholic missionaries proceeded on the assumption of “cultural monism” around 1900 (Parekh 2000). Monism assumes that there is only one true culture, that this culture is universal, and that Western civilization defines this universal culture most exhaustively. Cultural differences are not so much differences in kind, but in degree, or rather stage: people with cultures that differ from Western civilization have not yet managed to disengage themselves from a lower stage of cultural development and will eventually also acquire culture, a process which may be speeded up with a little help from outside.

Understandably, children were important targets for missionaries. During the first years of the Congo Free State, native children were collected in large numbers in order to be raised and educated in missionary homes. Following the so-called *ferme chapelle* strategy of evangelization (Markowitz 1973), they were removed from their native villages in order to clear away all obstacles to the inculcation of new beliefs, habits and customs. Some of these children were bought from slave owners, others were simply kidnapped (Delathuy 1992, 1994). Once adult, these children often became zealous missionaries themselves, assisting their “white fathers” in preaching the gospel. They also made suitable recruits for the *Force Publique* and the newly installed mines and factories.

Initially, missionaries were loath to retain aspects of their native cultural heritage for these “adopted” children. From a monist perspective, African children had nothing to lose and everything to gain. This is borne out in a particularly striking manner by the missionary work of Father Pieter van Impe (1840–1924), who conceived of the idea to transport Congolese children to Belgium, in order to give them a proper European education there. They were to return to the Congo as black missionaries by the time their training was complete. In 1892, he founded the organization *Het Werk van de Opvoeding der Jonge Kongoleezen in België* (The Project to Educate Young Congolese in Belgium), embarking upon his educational experiment in the Flemish village of Gijzegem. Father Van Impe wanted to prove by means of these “children of Gijzegem”, as they soon came to be called, that the Congolese were fully capable of becoming just as civilized as white people, when nurtured properly. During the World Exhibition of 1897 in Tervuren, Father Van Impe proudly exhibited “his” children, who displayed their skills in sowing, embroidering, playing Western musical instruments such as the mandoline, attired in Western clothes. According to Van Impe, these children were ready to welcome the King with a performance of the *Brabançonne* on demand.

Although Van Impe was forced to abandon his educational experiment in 1900 because of financial difficulties, there were other opportunities for those who want-



The children of Gijzegem (Repro-service RMCA, Tervuren)

ed to contribute to the missionary cause while remaining in the mother country. Devout Catholics were invited to support missionary work in the Congo by “buying”, that is, symbolically adopting, native children, who were subsequently baptized and raised in missionary homes. Often, the beneficiaries were granted the privilege of choosing the new name for the baptized child and would receive photographs of their smiling foster children as a reward for their munificence (Nederveen Pieterse 1992: 72).⁵

Children’s books transformed these missionary practices into symbolic structures. They often did so by remediating the stories (diaries, memoirs, travel narratives) reported by the missionaries reported to the home front, through the motifs, tropes and themes, which are proper to the institution of children’s literature at large. Missionary stories were eminently adaptable to children’s literature. Ever since its early origins in the eighteenth century, children’s literature had fulfilled the dual function of entertainment and instruction. Missionary stories were highly suitable for both purposes. They had the appeal of the exotic and catered to a taste for adventure. At the same time, they were per definition edifying, as missionary work was thought to follow a moral and religious vocation. Consequently, the missionary was a highly popular hero in European children’s literature from the second half of the nineteenth century up to the 1960s (Kearney 1983, Dujardin 2005).

It is not just that missionary stories made perfect subject matter for children’s books, but also that children’s books were perfect for remediating the clichéd image of the orphaned black child. Undoubtedly, the literary conventions of children’s fiction facilitated and enhanced the representation of black children as essentially parentless, because children’s fiction often represents its major heroes and heroines as orphans (Griswold 1992, Kimball 1999). Many famous heroes and heroines of children’s fiction are orphans, from *Oliver Twist* to *Huckleberry Finn* to *Pippi Longstocking* and *Harry Potter*. There is a certain narrative necessity to expose child characters to danger by depriving them of parental support, in order to create the proper circumstances within which the hero may prove his mettle.

Strictly speaking, neither Dagoë nor Benny are literally orphaned. For all we know, Dagoë might well return to his mother in his native village, and Benny is eventually reconciled with his parents in his new colonial surroundings. Their “adoptions” are symbolic *rites de passage*, which represent their progress from primitivism to civilization. They are presented in a manner similar to the display of the children of Gijzegem, that is, as basically devoid of parentage, lineage, and heritage, which endows them with the capacity to become whiter than white. In both cases, the adoption plot transcends the specifics of their historical and geographical location, westernizing the black child characters under study. In *Dagoë*, this abstraction is achieved through the perennial parable of the Good Samaritan, while *Benny Ntumba* achieves a similar purpose by narrating the black boy’s life story according to the

portrait-of-the-artist-as-a-young-man scenario. Many artist biographies dwell on the necessity of the hero's disengagement from his roots if he is to turn into a proper artist. This also applies to Mulongu.

The effect of this generalizing mode of narrative representation is that the question of whether a black child has biological parents or not becomes largely irrelevant. Even if their parents are still around, they are not "real" parents in the true sense of the word, because they have remained children themselves. Thus, orphanhood is transformed into a state of the black child's soul, rather than a characteristic of its material and social living conditions. As orphanhood is turned into a metaphor, it becomes trans-historical: "that is basically what black children are." Once it has acquired this transcendent quality, the adoption plot may be recycled almost indefinitely, outliving the missionary practices which originally constituted its rationale.

The adoption plot in contemporary popular culture

One might be tempted to shrug one's shoulders over the "naïveté" of writers living half a century ago, who wrote in the humble vein of children's literature. However, this gesture would be in conflict with the fact that the stereotype of the "orphaned" African child is still with us today, although it is currently reiterated and revitalized at other cultural sites. The mainstay of the adoption plot has shifted from children's literature to the multimedia advertisement campaigns, which support international relief efforts. The imagery of international relief has a way of focusing on child victims, while adult victims, most notably the male parents of these children, are moved out of the picture (Burman 1994, Batty 2000). Newspaper advertisements and TV news items tend to replace the parents of child victims as figures of competence and efficacy by the potential donors of financial aid. As a critic of the advertisement campaigns for international relief in Ethiopia put it:

[...] humanitarian donors in North America and Europe feel compelled to assume the role of *in locus parentis* (sic), once again placing ourselves, however compassionate our motives, in a paternalistic relationship with the Third World that, in effect, displaces biological parents, many of whom may be living despite their notable absence from the images we see. The solitary child appears to us as a *de facto* orphan, most notably in advertisements that solicit "foster" parents for Third World children. (Batty 2000: 26)

The child victims of famine and war are depicted in isolation, and "we" are called upon to compensate for "their" lack of proper caretakers by providing effective aid.

Two years ago, the American pop artist Madonna caused a great stir when she adopted the thirteen-month old Malawi boy, David Banda. Although David was living in an orphanage at that time, he was not an orphan in the Western sense of the

word.⁶ David's father, a struggling farmer, was unable to take care of his son all by himself after his wife had died in childbirth, and felt compelled to commit him to an orphanage. When Madonna and her husband Guy Richie appeared on the scene, the boy's father did not seem to fully grasp what they were after.⁷ Yohane Banda stated he had let go of his child under the assumption that the separation from his son was going to be temporary: "What I know and what I was told is that good Samaritans want to help raise my son by sending him to school and looking after him. When he finishes school he will come back home to stay with us." (*Time*, October 24, 2006)

The trope of the Good Samaritan would crop up time and again in the media hype that dogged Madonna's adoption. Thus, Reverend Madalitso Mbewe, head of the Malawian Calvary Family Church, praised Madonna for her humanitarian compassion, explicitly comparing her to the Good Samaritan ("Kerkleiders: Madonna is een barmhartige Samaritaan," www.ikonrtv.nl/kerknieuws). Other organizations, however, such as The Human Rights Consultative Committee from Malawi and the children's rights organization *Eye of the Child* made a concerted effort to block the adoption, because in its opinion it smacked of the commodification of Third World children. They claimed that Madonna had circumvented the international adoption laws, thereby paving the way for other rich people who want to buy Third World children. The Dutch minister of developmental cooperation, Agnes van Ardenne, also criticized Madonna's decision. "As if you are buying a singing bird. [...] Their lack of our luxury is compensated for by so many alternative goods, such as their native culture and traditions and communal ties which are so much stronger in developing countries than in ours" ("Van Ardenne hekelt Madonna om adoptie," *De Telegraaf*, October 31, 2006).

Clearly, then, the adoption plot is still operative in contemporary culture. Some celebrities even go so far as to act upon it.⁸ The popular media have spawned stereotypical representations of African children with such intensity that the image of the starving, isolated child has become the very icon of the African continent. Children's literature constitutes a crucial link between these contemporary images of the orphaned black child and the missionary practices of a century ago. Giving literary shape to missionary projects to convert African children, a specific type of image of the African child was created, which could then be repeated almost indefinitely in ever changing contexts.

The arguments above also demonstrate that postcolonial criticism can only neglect children's literature at its own peril. As stated before, childhood imagery constituted a lens through which the colonizers looked at the colonized. Colonized peoples were conceived of and treated as children. As children's literature is an important cultural technology for constructing childhood images, it was instrumental in fleshing out the child-savage equation and in redefining this parallel in changing historical circumstances. As such, it provides us with a rich historical record, which illuminates the various ramifications of colonialist paternalism. Further inquiry into

the source materials of children's literature will not only inform us more closely about the specific narrative forms and metaphors which represented the child-savage equation, but it may also enable us to become more reflexive about those parts of the colonialist cultural heritage that we have recycled time and again to this very day – be it often unwittingly.

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Notes

- 1 A perusal of introductions and readers, encyclopedias and surveys of post-colonialism, which have appeared since the 1980s, quickly demonstrates that children's literature does not resort under postcolonial theory. The noteworthy exception to this rule is Wallace (1994).
- 2 I have decided to focus on children's books from the 1950s which appeared shortly before the process of decolonization began to gather momentum, as these works inherited the full colonial cultural heritage just before colonialism began to collapse. As such, they are highly informative about the cultural commonplaces that informed the colonialist enterprise as long as it lasted.
- 3 Obviously, these observations do not apply to colonial children's literature as a whole, as these books do not always deal with the encounter between black children and white civilization. Some of them are mere adventure stories, for instance, which narrate the adventures of white boys in the jungle. Black children do not necessarily play a role here. Others attempt to depict native children in their own habitat, and this often implies that whites hardly enter the picture.
- 4 This positive image of the white man's ways is completely at odds with the historical fact that the colonial occupation of the Congo strongly depended on forced labor, both during and after king Leopold's reign, as has been extensively documented by the work of the historian Jules Marchal.
- 5 As Marvin Markowitz (1973) points out, missionary practices diversified after World War I, when the position of cultural monism was supplemented by the alternative approach of "cultural selectivity". Cultural selectivity does not reject native cultures wholesale, but tries to distinguish between "good" aspects worth retaining, and "bad" parts to be replaced by Christianity. If Father van Impe exemplifies cultural monism, then Father Guido Haazen, the initiator of the Missa Luba and the director of the boys' choir *Les Troubadours du Roi Baudoin* (King Boudewijn's Minstrels), epitomizes cultural selectivity. Anne de Vries wavered between monism and cultural selectivity in his children's books about Suriname. Remarkably enough, a later work narrating the adventures of an Indian boy, *Panokko en de witte mensen* (Panokko and the white people, 1957) represents a failed adoption! Panokko and his two friends are adopted by a white missionary, who grants them the privilege to receive a good education at a white school. The stifling boarding school regime contrasts unfavorably with their former way of life, which was so much more independent and adventurous. The boys grow homesick and decide to return to their native village, a decision, which is represented in an empathetic manner by the narrator. In this book, white civilization is not all good, nor native culture all bad.
- 6 It has often been pointed out that the application of the Western concept of "orphan" to African children is problematic anyhow, because the African kinship system differs from Western concepts of the family. African children grow up in extended families. This implies that the loss of their parents does not necessarily turn them into orphans in our sense of the word, as their next of kin are supposed to take care of them, provided they have any left.
- 7 Guy Ritchie did not stay on the scene for long. When David was 3 (in 2008), Madonna and Ritchie separated. Thus, David Banda has gone from a single father to a married couple to a single mother. Meanwhile, Yohane Banda remarried and became a father for the second time.
- 8 This practice has given rise to a new slang expression of "Benetton mom": "A rich woman who adopts babies from Africa or other exotic locales, apparently for their use as fashion accessories." Another famous example of a Benetton mom, besides Madonna, is the American actress, Angelina Jolie (Chiraskamin 2007)

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