

# The Orphan Industrial Complex: A Theater of Altruism

---

By Melanie Chan

---



Melanie Chan is a second-year Master of Public Policy student at the Harvard Kennedy School. She also works part time to support capacity building at Evidence for Policy Design (EPoD) in

the Kennedy School's Center for International Development, as well as innovation for the savings group program at HOPE International. Prior to the Kennedy School she taught art in Kenya and was a greeting card designer at a social enterprise employing women who are survivors of sex trafficking in the Philippines. She holds a B.A. in Psychology and Art Practice from UC Berkeley.

In my early twenties I spent many weekends at an orphanage in Ngong, a cluster of cement buildings with *mabati* roofs nestled at the foot of seven green hills just outside Nairobi, Kenya's capital. During the week, I was an art teacher at an international school in Nairobi and on the weekends, I'd board an unruly bus at Dagoretti Corner and ride for forty-five minutes past Racecourse, Karen, and Bulbul, to the T-junction that constitutes the whole of Ngong town, and then catch a *bodaboda* or walk the remaining mile of muddy road to the borehole that marked the orphanage's entrance.

Orphanages are called children's homes in this part of the world, and this one was home to more than eighty children, who

hand-washed their clothes, cleaned the halls, finished their breakfast of boiled arrowroot and *chai*, and started their studies before the crack of dawn every morning. They also kept a little farm of cows, chickens, rabbits, and hydroponic fodder for revenue, and pumped methane from underground vats of cow dung straight to the kitchen to light their cooking fires. The borehole provided water, which they also sold for a fair price to the neighboring residents. These were the things they'd show off to the teams of Westerners that came every summer to volunteer, who, just by showing up, unwittingly played their part in the orphanage's veneer.

One of the older boys who had been at the home the longest was always busy drawing or creating things, like beads out of recycled newspaper or furniture out of old tires. Everyone at the home told me he was born to be an artist, and since I was an art teacher, I offered to give him drawing lessons. I taught him how to look at something familiar like it was new, to gesture at the outline of a shape, find a light source and cast a shadow. But these drawing lessons, however, turned into informal therapy sessions. Over the course of a year, his typical sunny extroversion and generous disposition turned moody and brooding. He began to confide in me more and more about his personal life – he was HIV positive, on medication, and frequently fatigued. This led to restless and agitated behavior. Despite my best intentions, I found myself wildly and awkwardly beyond my depth when he grew increasingly clingy and would, without warning, start whining like a younger child or

cry. However, there was no one I could refer him to, and no professional at the children's home who knew any better way of helpin. With my recently minted B.A. in Psychology, I was disturbingly the most qualified person on the compound.

The greatest upheaval, however, was listening to him talk about his father whom he spoke about in the present tense. After asking around, I discovered that not only was his father alive, but he also lived only a couple hours car ride away. And this was not an anomaly; the more children I got to know, the more I heard mention of a father or a mother just a county or two away in their rural upcountry. I realized I had not been spending weekends visiting a children's home for orphaned children. I had been spending weekends visiting a home for institutionalized children who were separated from at least one of their parents. So what was I even doing there?

Every summer, I would also help coordinate the arrival of a team from America, a motley crew ranging from high school seniors to working professionals to retirees seeking a way to serve, a sense of community, an adventure, a story to tell, or some combination of the above. But with each successive trip I coordinated, I began to understand what these trips too often were: a stage for people's escapist fantasies, a veneer of well-meaning intent flaking off to reveal people's misplaced philanthropic desires.

I watched the same scene play out again and again: Westerners exit the Jomo Kenyatta International Airport, and the steamy equatorial climate—something about the quality of the sunlight and the way humidity releases earthy smells—almost intoxicates them, heightening suggestibility. Westerners arrive at the children's home and the children, curious who has come this time, come flocking. Within the hour, even the shiest ones will follow the Westerners around, hold their hands,

take selfies with them. Westerners post on social media of choice, a photo of themselves surrounded by poor, joyful African children.

As the week transpires – and Westerners have spent multiple days digging latrines or covering walls with a fresh coat of paint, learning some of the children's names and running around the compound with African children on their shoulders under the expansive African sky—these posts grow thicker with delusion, captioned with sentiments like “these children are angels,” “I wish I could stay here forever,” and “this is my African home/family.”

Westerners have carried over suitcases full of old t-shirts (that feed the *mitumba* second-hand clothing markets), soccer balls, pencils, and candy, which they hand out ad hoc to eager children who already have yellowed, rotting teeth. So intoxicated are these Westerners that they don't realize that these poor, joyful African children are indeed human children, and if they were to see their own children back home exhibiting such behaviors—trauma bonding and disordered attachment—they would rush them to intensive developmental psychotherapy and a dental hygienist instead.

Then, inevitably, the team of Westerners, sated by their good work, generosity, and the warm glow of dancing, singing, and playing soccer with dozens of children all week, wish a tearful goodbye (but only the Westerners are tearful), promising to come back next year. They return home with their African bracelets, photos, and tales, having labored physically and emotionally all week, having given generous sums of money, and never knowing they have both exploited and been exploited.

The reality is that orphanage tourism is often a business in Kenya, financed by well-intentioned travelers from wealthy nations.<sup>1</sup> Charitable children's institutions (CCIs)

(i.e. orphanages or children's homes) can be lightning rods for charitable giving, as many foreign tourists that come to Kenya each year spend time with children at CCIs as unskilled "voluntourists," and make sizeable donations or sponsorships to them.<sup>2</sup> This allows CCIs to be viable and even lucrative businesses, sustaining what is known as the "orphan industrial complex."<sup>3</sup> Children come from poverty-stricken areas and are institutionalized with the promise of education and healthcare, even though many of them actually have at least one living parent or close extended family members. This is how the Western demand for altruistic experiences meets the Kenyan supply of children's homes.

As of 2017, however, the Kenyan government has put a moratorium on new CCIs.<sup>4</sup> There is now a growing movement to "deinstitutionalize" these children, to reunite them with their families, and instead, strengthen social services locally, provide cash-transfers, and build capacity for community-based care.<sup>5</sup> Even J.K. Rowling has her own nonprofit, the *Lumos Foundation* (<https://wearelumos.org>), dedicated to this. But the research tells a more complicated story.

While the negative impacts of institutionalization on children's development are well documented, and there is no denying the dangers of neglect and abuse within CCIs, there is also significant research on how institutions are sometimes better equipped to care for children, given the high risk of physical or sexual abuse in certain family-based environments, and the effects of poverty and rapid urbanization in Kenya.<sup>6</sup> The debate is still ongoing, about whether CCIs should be eliminated or whether that is an overreaction to the "orphan industrial complex."

I still don't know what to make of all of this—ten of the young adults who grew up in that children's home have graduated with at least a two-year university diploma, and three

of them are pursuing degrees at universities in the United States through connections made by visitors to the home. Despite the theater that these homes can be, with Kenyan "orphans" and Western "voluntourists" dutifully playing their roles on this strangely artificial stage called the "children's home," these resources would not be available to the children otherwise.

I have an upcoming interview with the boy to whom I used to give art lessons. I will steer the conversation to talk about how he feels about his time at the children's home—does it make sense why he was there?; what was his take on the visitors?; and how was it growing up without a father? I want to peel back the velvet curtain, reveal the stage, and examine its artifice. But I might just end up asking him whether he still makes art.

---

## Endnotes

- 1 Njoroge, Simon. "Battle for the Family's Soul: Anatomy of the Orphanage Phenomenon in Kenya." *The Elephant*, July 25, 2019. <https://www.theelephant.info/features/2019/07/25/battle-for-the-familys-soul-anatomy-of-the-orphanage-phenomenon-in-kenya/>.
- 2 Rotabi, Karen Smith, Jini L. Roby, and Kelley McCreery Bunkers. "Altruistic Exploitation: Orphan Tourism and Global Social Work." *The British Journal of Social Work* 47, no. 3 (April 1, 2017): 648–65.
- 3 Cheney, Kristen, and Stephen Ucembe. *Disadvantaged Childhoods and Humanitarian Intervention: Processes of Affective Commodification and Objectification*. *Palgrave Studies on Children and Development*. Springer International Publishing, 2019. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-01623-4\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-01623-4_2).
- 4 Nairobi News. "Government Finally Acts to Protect Kenyan Children," May 1, 2019. <https://nairobi.news.nation.co.ke/government-protect-kenyan-children/>.
- 5 Chege, Njeri, and Stephen Ucembe. "Kenya's

- Over-Reliance on Institutionalization as a Child Care and Child Protection Model: A Root-Cause Approach.” *Social Sciences* 9, no. 4 (April 2020): 57.
- 6 Braitstein, Paula. “Institutional Care of Children in Low- and Middle-Income Settings: Challenging the Conventional Wisdom of Oliver Twist.” *Global Health: Science and Practice* 3, no. 3 (September 10, 2015): 330–32.