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Isaac Yoryor

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How We Can “Bell the Cat”: African Canadian Perspectives of the Canadian Child Welfare System

ISAAC YORYOR*

I am very grateful to Canada for what it has done for impoverished people, refugees, and immigrants from all over the world; as a Christian refugee who has benefited from this country’s generosity, I feel an obligation to give back in my own special way. It is my hope to describe a refugee parent’s perspective of Canada’s child welfare system.

Throughout the world, Canada is held in high esteem for its social services and respect for cultural differences, often making it an ideal refuge. Many newcomers have experienced suffering and deprivation before immigrating to Canada, and many believe they can live their dreams when they arrive. However, their dreams are often not given an opportunity to become reality because of systemic racism, which I understand to be a form of intentional marginalization. This injustice is especially prominent in the child welfare system, which faces criticism from different advocacy groups due to the overrepresentation of Aboriginal and African Canadian children in state care.

I will continue to be a community activist and hope to accurately represent the voices of African newcomer and refugee parents within the child welfare system as there is a pressing need for these voices to be heard. The extended family system of caring for children within many African communities has given us a better understanding of how to care for our own children, and so our communities need a forum where we can have a say in the child welfare system. The failure of the system to engage African newcomer and refugee parents has created difficulties for families after their arrival.

My research on cultural relevance is influenced by Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings, the Kellner Family Professor of Urban Education in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. I intend to expand on the issues of culture, and the misunderstanding and misrepresentation of many immigrant parents who, as a result of child welfare interventions, have been separated from their children for decades. My fervent hope is that this work will deepen the understanding of child welfare workers of diverse cultural practices in the raising of children, and help to integrate the values of African refugee and immigrant communities with the standards of Canadian society. Many refugees and immigrants from diverse cultures desire to embrace the ethics, integrity, personal freedoms, democratic values, and respect for justice that are all frequently characterized as part of Canadian society. At the same time, they want their beliefs and practices in caring for their children to be understood and a respectful dialogue about how to ensure the best outcomes for their children.

Often, the complexity of culture shock leads to struggles for parents in adjusting to their new environment. It took me ten years in order to adapt to living in Canada and to western culture. Immigrants coming to this part of the world often find everything strange; life at times seems overwhelming to newcomers. I hope you can benefit from my experiences and my

* Isaac Alex Yoryor is a community activist from Hamilton, Ontario. Born in Liberia, he spent fifteen years at the Liberian Refugee Camp in Ghana, West Africa from 1990 to 2005 before resettling in Canada on November 2005 with his family. They became proud Canadian citizens in 2009. A proud father of four girls and an adopted son, he is also a student of the McMaster Divinity College pursuing a Master of Theological Studies with a focus in pastoral care and counseling.

community's stories. If you, as a newcomer, do not understand the environment and the way of life, or sometimes feel confused and stressed, remember that you are not alone.

I am hopeful that sharing my experience will motivate leaders to adopt the recommendations for a more open and collaborate child welfare system. Although Canada is imperfect, I wrote this paper motivated by my passion for my new country. In doing so, I am taking up my role as a Canadian giving back to his community.

I. RISING AND FALLING IN CANADA

My journey to Canada started with a flight from Africa, through Germany, and finally to Canada. It took sixteen hours. It was about the flight from fear to renewed hope; when we landed, there was a burst of appreciative applause. The date was 15 November 2005. I had lived in a Liberian refugee camp for the past fifteen years, which was established in 1990 through the Ghanaian President Jerry John Rawlings. I still remember the feeling of rising and falling, and this metaphor describes how I experienced Canada, which set the foundation for the rest of my life in this country.

As our family adapted to this cultural shift, our perspective also changed from an African parent's viewpoint to a Canadian one. Of course, this perspective is unique to each experience; newcomers and immigrants are coming in with different histories, and every country has its way of life, traditions, and cultural values. How we experience Canada can unfold in many ways. For some, it refers to this country's obsession with hockey. For others, it conjures thoughts of a cottage involving outdoor barbecues and cold beer. And the Canadian experience sometimes relates more broadly to our government, social and educational institutions, and the legal system.

Unfortunately, for many African newcomer and refugee parents, the Canadian experience may have negative connotations. Parents come here with different cultural expectations and encounter difficulty understanding why things work the way they do. They struggle to learn the language, to earn a pay cheque in new ways, and even to live in a developed society. Many parents are confused by Canadian attitudes regarding marriage, sexual equality, child rearing (including the setting of boundaries), and sexual orientation.

The dominant culture has its ways of tactfully suppressing others who come with their own cultural beliefs and practices. The expectation that everyone should live in accordance with the standards of the dominant culture, and largely disregard their native cultural values after migration, is communicated explicitly and implicitly. However, many newcomers find these laws and customs to be inexplicable. Some people come to see this kind of Canadian experience as a set of factors that not only combine to keep them repressed and unable to reach their goals, but as barriers that keep their native culture subordinate.

II. INTERACTIONS BETWEEN DOMINANT AND SUBORDINATE CULTURES

African newcomer and refugee parents, as members of subordinate cultures, are liable to change in response to pressures from the dominant culture. Notably, the pressure to conform becomes a psychological imperative on resettling families; the complications of resettlement lead some newcomers to feel that the dominant culture is messianic, liberating themselves from a supposedly primitive lifestyle.

Cultures should find ways to coexist in their shared environment. However, issues arise when communities must both share spaces with one another, while also maintaining and determining their own unique cultural identities. In many ways, the Canadian experience can be a repressive networking experience. The space is not shared with newcomers, and their cultures cannot find many opportunities to be expressed. Even after arriving, newcomers may feel as if they are in the middle of the ocean.

A. NEWCOMER PARENTS’ EXPERIENCES

One area of intense pressure for newcomer families comes from the child welfare system. Families feel pressured to conform to Canadian models of child rearing, and some may find themselves facing a Children’s Aid Society (CAS). While this interaction may be a ground for bridging the gap between cultures, many newcomer families instead feel like they are misunderstood and misjudged. They are vulnerable and unfamiliar with their new environment, and so feel manipulated to fit the model of the dominant culture at the risk of losing their family.

These actions are likely not intentional on the part of the social workers, but rather are symptoms of a broader systemic blind spot in how Canadians interact with newcomers. Canadians are sometimes insensitive in the comments they make. I have personally experienced confrontational questions from Canadians. Even question like, “Where are you from?” or “Were you born in Canada” may be threatening in a particular context. These issues may seem harmless to the person asking, but may generate anxiety and fear in newcomers, especially in situations where African newcomer and refugee parents feel that they may be questioned for a practice that is normal in their own culture but which is misunderstood or judged negatively within Canada.

The dominant culture negatively impacts African newcomer and refugee parents who are bridging cultures and parenting under difficult circumstances. In this context, parents and their children are striving to adapt to new expectations. The voices of these parents and their communities are underrepresented in the conversation about how child welfare systems are imagined and delivered. The African newcomer and refugee parents’ concerning stories centre on the suppression of “them” as a “subordinate culture.” In other words, the overrepresentation of our children in care and the absence of our voices as parents maintain the will of the dominant culture. The issues of race, disproportionality, and disparity need to be motivators for change, a chance to re-imagine, and an opportunity to reintroduce our voice into the conversation.

B. THE MASK OF CHILDREN’S AID SOCIETIES

Many African newcomer and refugee parents feel that CASs is dysfunctional when dealing with them. CASs should try to engage those parents who love their children and want them to have a better life. Canada is a multicultural country with multicultural families. People have come here with different backgrounds and desires, and they deserve greater respect of, and sensitivity to, their culture and practices. In some cases, child welfare system involvement results in the removal of children from their homes. Often, the problem is simply a cultural difference that calls out for education and engagement rather than confrontation and disruption.

People from all around the world have similar objectives where their children are concerned. They want their children to be healthy, well-educated, and responsible. Most parents want to have a positive influence on their children by maintaining appropriate limits, sharing family and cultural values, giving direction, and fostering healthy life goals. Parents naturally

feel a great deal of anxiety when a CAS intervention causes a loss of control and a perception of undermined parental influence.

The idea of “it takes a village to raise a child” in African communities predates European exploitation of Africa; African newcomer and refugee communities should be given the opportunity to be the “village” that assists each other within the broader culture. The “Sixties Scoop” has demonstrated the impact of placing Aboriginal children in homes that were not culturally appropriate, which is a concern for present cultural minorities. CAS workers need to be trained to understand various cultural backgrounds. It should be mandated that CASs work with parents and communities to ensure that children maintain connection to their culture. These organizations should look to the children’s extended families and cultural communities when safety demands removal from their homes. There is a need to review some of the actions taken by the government through CASs. I participated in a year-long social services research workshop sponsored by McMaster University’s School of Social Work. This study indicated that newcomers and refugees often feel they are victims rather than beneficiaries of CAS involvement.¹ Many immigrants believe that CAS decisions are discriminatory, and that decisions are often made based on race and colour.

I believe the actions taken by a CAS regarding African newcomer and refugee parents and children are not intentionally harmful, though the results can be significantly damaging. CAS workers often do not understand the cultural and religious differences of the immigrant families. A Canadian-born, middle-class social worker will have different family and societal experiences than those of a poor African family who has barely survived many years of deprivation in refugee camps.

C. DIALOGUE BETWEEN DOMINANT AND SUBORDINATE CULTURES

African newcomer and refugee families sometimes come into contact with child welfare agencies because of physical punishment. I can cite examples of a refugee family that was greatly impacted because the husband used physical punishment to discipline his stepson. Their child was placed into a group home, placing emotional strain on the family members. These interactions and their effects on African newcomer and refugee families can greatly influence their view of the CAS.

When social workers encounter behaviours that are seen by a family as acceptable in their cultural context but unacceptable in Canada’s dominant culture, they are thrust into a culturally-charged conflict. Often, this confrontation arises from the good intentions of African newcomer and refugee parents who want what is best for their children.

These families struggle to navigate the complex set of boundaries for disciplinary methods that are accepted in their new environment; boundaries that are themselves shifting and changing. For example, a Supreme Court of Canada decision upheld section 43 of the *Criminal Code*, which allows parents and teachers to use reasonable force as a way to correct a pupil or child.² However, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission called upon the Government of Canada to repeal this provision because of the role that physical punishment played in residential

¹ See Gary C Dumbrill, “Your Policies, Our Children: Messages from Refugee Parents to Child Welfare Workers and Policymakers” (2008) 88:3 Child Welfare 145.

² *Canadian Foundation for Children, Youth and the Law v Canada (Attorney General)*, 2004 SCC 4; *Criminal Code*, RSC 1985, c C-46, s 43.

schools. Understanding these boundaries and finding the right methods within them is possible, but it can be difficult without the right support.

African newcomer and refugee parents need to recognize that the dominant culture will not accept some approaches to discipline and accept the expectations that the system places on them. But these expectations must be mutual. These parents need the child welfare system to engage them in an open dialogue in order to help them adapt from prior practices to culturally acceptable ones that are respectful and empowering. Instead of negative responses to the approaches used by parents, I truly believe that parents will be helped when their good intentions are used as a tool to bridge the cultural differences in discipline.

But not every refugee family has the same experiences and beliefs as me, and they require their own kind of support to bridge these cultural differences. The need for this supportive dialogue forms the core message of my recommendations.

D. FAMILY SEPARATION: THE NEGATIVE IMPACT OF CHILD WELFARE INTERVENTION ON FAMILIES

One experience I personally encountered in was a single mother from our newcomer community in London, Ontario, Canada. After a family feud with her daughter, her daughter was taken into the care of child welfare authorities. Within a year, after some inappropriate activities with other children who she met in the group home, her daughter lost her life. The child welfare system fails when it does not take into consideration its obligation to protect the child from abuse when in its care.

Many placements are not completely adequate for the child and can even lead to a more abusive situation, or as in the above case, death. Additionally, these children suffer from isolation, loneliness, and fear when they do not understand what is happening to them. For some, this impact will be reminiscent of their experiences in refugee camps. These children often are left with deep emotional scars when not dealt with appropriately, and this is made even worse if the intervention is not within their own culture.

There is an urgent need to review the social service system’s impact on family separation and a need for social workers to be more accountable for promoting family stability. Many newcomer families often do not understand why their children are being removed, leading to major dysfunctions in the system. Sometimes social workers are perceived as agents in the breaking up of families. This perception is especially prevalent amongst immigrant parents and families.

III. WHO WILL “BELL THE CAT”?

I found a 17th-century allegory about a group of mice that moved into a neighbourhood to be a fitting analogy to today’s child welfare system. The mice were considered fortunate because they had abundant food and water and a comfortable home. The mice community was united, and they always shared meals together. When the food was ready, they met around the table to eat together as a family.

One fateful morning, the mice woke to hear some unsettling news. A group of cats and their kittens had just moved into the neighbourhood. News of the new neighbours was very scary. The mice debated plans to reduce the threat of the cats. One of them proposed placing a bell around the neck of one of the cats, so that they would be cautioned of an impending attack.

The plan was much admired by the others until the little mouse asked, “Who will volunteer to place the bell on the cat?” All of them made excuses. The story is used to teach the wisdom of evaluating a plan not only on how desirable the outcome is, but also on how it can be executed. It provides a lesson about the fundamental difference between ideas and their feasibility, and how this affects the value of a given plan.

The story gives rise to the expression “to bell the cat,” which means to attempt to perform an impossibly difficult task. Over the years in Canada, there has been an outcry from marginalized communities, including Aboriginal, African Canadian, and other minority communities. Research has shown that children of these communities have been overrepresented in state care.

Like the stories of the mice above, members of these communities have made attempts to solve the problem. Over the years, Canadians have called out abuses against children around the world, although there remain unaddressed concerns at home.

In October 2016, the Osgoode Hall Law School, in collaboration with the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada, the African Canadian Legal Clinic, and the Action Group on Access to Justice, brought a cross-section of minority communities in Canada together to find a way to “bell the cat” on inequality in social services in Canada. We cannot be deterred like the mice; we are a stronger force together when we galvanize our energy to end systemic racism and build a stronger community.

The child welfare system is the problem, not our community. Both government and our marginalized communities can benefit through reimagining the child welfare system of Canada. All Canadians stand to benefit if this proposal finds a place in the child welfare system. As a stakeholder, and in my capacity as a preacher and a community activist, I am compelled to help find these remedies.

IV. REMEDIES

Each year, Canada embraces thousands of immigrant families and children. These families need the child welfare system to be culturally relevant and sensitive to their needs. However, while the children of African Canadian and other marginalized groups are overrepresented in care, the voices of these communities are underrepresented when discussing how child welfare should be imagined and provided. Overrepresentation of our children in care and the absence of our voices as parents maintain the will of the dominant culture.

There must be a change in the system, but I question the value of hiring expensive consultants to explain our cultures and the barriers we face when we would prefer to speak ourselves. We are best suited to elaborate our own needs. We understand our culture. We understand the impact the dominant culture has upon us. And we love our children like nobody else can. We know our children sometimes struggle in this society, and we know that sometimes parents also struggle with helping their children. We know this struggle because it is our struggle. Therefore, it is our community’s responsibility to help care for our own. We need the opportunity to give voice to the marginalization faced in Canada through the racism that operates at personal, systemic, and cultural levels.

When child protection services come knocking, our experience is that unfair assumptions are made about African newcomer and refugee communities. Social service workers need to work with the affected communities to reimage how to keep children safe at home, how to keep

them safe when families cannot, and how to respect their cultural origins when they are placed outside their families.

A. A CALL FOR THE CREATION OF A PARENT ASSOCIATION AND A PARENT ADVISORY COMMITTEE

For positive change to happen, appropriate forums must be identified and created. I propose a “Parent’s Association of Canada” (PAC). The PAC would create collaborative representation from a variety of communities that share the broader concerns of communities adapting to a dominant culture while maintaining their cultural values. The PAC would be empowered to speak on behalf of its members to a variety of institutions involved in the social service system, which would include child welfare, but also the education, healthcare, housing, and legal systems. I hope that a PAC might seek representation on the boards of Children’s Aid Societies, school boards’ Special Education Advisory Committees, the Parent Councils of individual schools with high immigrant populations, and other boards that speak to the needs of integrating communities.

Looking at the complications of evolving the welfare system, it is also advisable to consider a “Parent’s Advisory Council,” which may have a slightly different structure than the PAC. Many newcomer groups have associations that meet a variety of needs with resettling in a new culture. The advisory council could serve as a conduit to facilitate cultural integration, helping newcomers adapt to cultural norms of Canadian society.

In the child welfare system, minority communities need the opportunity to express their understanding of their family’s needs and their cultural expectations. They also need to demonstrate their willingness to engage in sharing with the broader community to ensure that the needs of children in their community are met. Institutions need to engage minority communities in listening to their needs and frustrations, utilizing the minority community’s strengths and resources to facilitate adaptation and education to Canadian norms and expectations.

Parents should also be given the support and opportunities for their voices to be heard. Beyond the PAC, this may involve members of a specific community supporting each other in caring for children in need of protection and in helping some parents adapt to boundaries generally accepted in the dominant culture.

B. A CALL FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF A CULTURAL CURRICULUM

Canada distinguishes itself as a cultural mosaic, resisting the urge to become a melting pot. The determination to be a society that values the unique contributions of the many cultural groups that together make up our society needs to be reflected in the child welfare system by showing sensitivity and engaging with each of those cultures.

In response, I am suggesting the creation of a cultural syllabus for colleges and universities that train social workers. With the introduction of special syllabi, social workers graduating from various Schools of Social Work can familiarize themselves with various cultural groups, concepts, ideologies, and theories. The social worker can thus be better prepared to deal with immigrant and refugee parents and children. In some instances, if a social worker goes to intervene in homes of an immigrant family, the social worker should begin the conversation by asking the country of origin. If such social worker has had prior knowledge of said family

cultural orientations, they would be better equipped to understand the potential cultural implications. Cultural educational preparedness of the workers will enhance workers' interventions. I believe if decisions are based on cultural sensitivities this would help close the social rift in the Canadian multicultural society.

Ideally, achieving these goals will support maintaining family units rather than dividing them. When parents' difficulties warrant separation, the goal of the system will be to help these troubled people build and maintain positive relationships, with the aspirational goal of reuniting families.

C. COMMUNITY SOCIAL ACTION

These calls to action are difficult but not impossible; we can still bell the cat. When I first arrived in Canada, I tried to contribute to my new community and country. I started by mobilizing fellow refugees from Liberia to form a local community organization. It was not an easy job. Nevertheless, today I am proud that we have an organized and dynamic Liberian community in Hamilton. I have also established a community-based ministry and fellowship to mobilize the social capital of these Canadian newcomers.

"Preaching through the Pen" is one of the ways I engage my community. This involves missionary writing that aims at teaching salvation through books, social networking, street crusades, and outreach programs. These include a mixture of religious and moral concepts, helping to strengthen those who are weak. I believe such programs can help individuals move forward. Community activism and support groups can help members of non-government agencies, local governments, and members of parliament to formulate policies and legislation in the interest of the community.

V. CONCLUSION

Our community wants to be part of the dialogue, to share in finding solutions for families in need of help from the child welfare system. How can we assert ourselves to make our dream come through? How can we constructively challenge government and the welfare system? These are the questions that my community must answer. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, in his mandate letter to the Minister of Family, Children, and Social Development, said:

Canadians need to have faith in their government's honesty and willingness to listen. I expect that our work will be informed by performance measurement, evidence, and feedback from Canadians. We will direct our resources to those initiatives that are having the greatest positive impact on the lives of Canadians, and that will allow us to meet our commitments to them.³

With these promises from the Prime Minister, I am delighted to make these recommendations as potential answers to my community's important questions. I strongly believe that these recommendations will provide helpful resolutions to some of the social

³ Mandate letter of the Rt Hon Justice Trudeau to Jean-Yves Duclos, Minister of Families, Children and Social Development, 1 September 2016, online: <pm.gc.ca/eng/minister-families-children-and-social-development-mandate-letter> [perma.cc/JDG3-A57G].

problems faced by parents and other marginalized communities in our country and in most Western nations.