

A Farewell to Innocence? African Youth and Violence in the Twenty-First Century

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This is a broad examination of the issue of youth violence in twenty-first-century Africa, looking at the context within which a youth culture of violence has evolved and attempting to understand the underlining discourses of hegemony and power that drive it. The article focuses specifically on youth violence as a political response to the dynamics of (dis)empowerment, exclusion, and economic crisis and uses (post)conflict states like Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Nigeria to explain not just the overall challenge of youth violence but also the nature of responses that it has elicited from established structures of authority. Youth violence is in many ways an expression of youth agency in the context of a social and economic system that provides little opportunity.

When a bird perches on a long rope, neither the bird nor the rope can expect stability.

Yoruba proverb

1. Introduction: Youth and Agency in the African Public Space

In most parts of modern Africa, the relationship between youth and society can be described by the metaphor of the bird and the rope. Like the rope, African society is faced with a growing youth population (the bird) whose very expression of “being” (the simple, and perhaps even necessary, act of perching) is potentially destabilizing for all concerned. Many societies in contemporary Africa are only now coming to terms with concerns that the youth question, and its potentially destabilizing impact on social relations, may be replacing ethnicity and religion as a more powerful framework for explaining dynamics of social change on the continent. This concern is neither unfounded nor misplaced, not just because more than two-thirds of the continent’s population are under the age of 35 years – making it the most “youthful” continent (Richards 2002), but more importantly because the variety of youth engagements is having significant impacts – for good or bad – in many communities. Therefore, rather than merely focusing on how society shapes youth and experiences of youth, understanding the dynamics of social change in

Africa also requires interrogating what De Boeck and Honwana (2005, 1) refer to as “the way young people in Africa reconfigure geographies of exclusion and inclusion.” That is, how they navigate the complex tapestry of exclusion in a post-colonial state that offers not only little opportunity for graduation into adulthood but also makes surviving the constraints and incentives of youth extremely difficult.

Using “African youth” as an analytical category, as we do in this paper, is not intended to suggest that youth can mean the same thing right across a continent as diverse as Africa. We acknowledge the diverse historical and material experiences of different African societies and how these may frame the way youth and their social roles are configured. In spite of this diversity however, there are congruencies that suggest that some limited generalization can be generated for analytical purposes. These congruencies are chiefly located in the generally accepted modern history of Africa, particularly as it relates to social pressures generated by violent conflict, economic crisis, and environmental challenges. These pressures appear to shape social responses in similar ways all over the continent, and youth is no exception.

To properly situate youth in the context of their engagement with the public space in Africa it is important to

find analytical congruencies, and also to broaden the conception of youth to more accurately reflect the realities of twenty-first-century Africa. A more accurate notion of youth will accommodate four basic perspectives. First, it will view youth as a social category within an intergenerational discourse. Second, it will place this intergenerational discourse within a broader discourse of power, authority, and control. Third, it will take due note of the shifting nature of the inherent relations of power and control and how this affects the social notions of youth. Finally, it will view youth as a lived experience rather than an imagined one.

With regard to these four perspectives, it becomes clear, as Bayart (1993) demonstrates, that generational categories such as childhood, youth, and adulthood are not neutral or even natural, but rather a “part of the struggle for influence and authority within almost every society” (Christiantine, Utas, and Vigh 2006, 11). Related to this struggle is a growing youth appropriation of the public sphere made possible largely by the empowering characteristics of emerging new media technologies. As a consequence, youth has become a very critical emergent category through which we may understand the dynamics of power, influence, and control in the emerging African public sphere. As important as youth participation in this sphere is, the implications for social mobilization and thus socio-political reconstruction, as demonstrated by recent youth-led social movements in North Africa, is perhaps much more significant. Thus, youth agency must be recognized not only as capable of freeing young people from dominance by a paternalistic and patrimonial system but also as capable of reconfiguring the nature of power within the broader society. It should be noted that the apprehensions of states, corporations, and traditional institutions about the agency of youth are most deeply embedded in this political implication. Any accurate reading of youth in Africa must thus take note of this political ramification and perhaps utilize it as a principal framework for analysis.

This paper takes due note of this political ramification and pays attention to how the four elements of our conceptualization of youth can help us understand the multidimensional challenges facing African youth, as well

as how these are altering and redefining the scope and content of their engagements within and with societies on the continent. This occurs within the particular context of youth-specific experiences of violence and (dis)empowerment, particularly in conflict societies like Nigeria, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. This is important as it demonstrates the intersection that can be discerned between such experiences and broader questions of identity, economic crisis, and human rights in Africa.

The paper is divided into five interconnected sections. After the introduction, we take a broad look at the context within which “youth” is constructed in Africa. We then go on, in the section that follows, to answer the questions of “why” and “how,” with respect to youth and violence in (post)conflict societies in Africa. We also look at the gendered peculiarities that may sometimes shape the way youth engage with and in violence, and the overall implications of all these for the ability of youth to effectively participate in the public sphere. In section four, we look at the various ways in which African states have responded to youth violence and examine what this means for processes of social change and politics in Africa. The final section summarizes the key arguments and draws attention to important lessons that may be learnt. These lessons include the need to reconfigure social conceptions of youth engagement with violence in ways that take due note of the broad context of crisis within which they develop rather than focusing on youth violence as an expression of criminality.

2. Youth and the African Crisis

While being young can be fraught with danger in many societies around the world, the peculiar African context of social deprivation within which many young people in Africa grow up makes the youth experience there particularly problematic. Therefore, taking a look at the structural conditions that shape youth experience and provide incentives for violent choices in the way they express “self” is critical to having a holistic conversation about the “youth problem.” In other words, beyond youths entering popular discussions as troublesome citizens – for instance, *township youths* in the heyday of apartheid in South Africa, *rarray boys* in the ghettos of Freetown, *egbesu boys* in Nigeria’s oil

delta, *area boys* in Lagos, *bakassi boys* in southeastern Nigeria – the circumstances pushing them towards the margins of society must also be privileged in social discourse (Rashid 1997; Ukiwo 2002). It is important to understand that the discourse on youth in Africa cannot and should not be dominated by narratives of violence which oftentimes tend to be too narrowly focused on youths as threats while ignoring the underlying social meanings of violence, for instance with regard to legitimate claims against an authoritarian and incapable state.

For Africa, the social circumstances within which state tyranny and ineptitude develop and which ultimately generate youth responses are generally well known. There appears to be a consensus in the literature that Africa faces a widespread and deepening crisis of development. Colonialism and its continued salience (Amin 2001), Africa's marginal place in the international system (Amin 2001; Bigsten and Dureval 2008), and its severe governance deficits (World Bank 1981, 2000; Fukuyama 2004) are frequently cited explanations. However, even though the economic numbers still remain comparatively low, there is growing optimism that Africa is at last showing signs of emerging from its underdevelopment. In fact, triumphalist literature has appeared, heralding the "institutionalization of political power in Africa" (Posner and Young 2007), the strengthening of civil society and democracy (Halperin, Siegle, and Weintein 2010), and the growth of its economies (Soludo 2005). What these suggest is that while there appears to be an enduring climate of socio-economic crisis, some opportunities for advancement are evident. The youth question evolves within this context and is therefore shaped by the intersection of crisis and opportunity.

To give clarity to our notion of youth developing within the context of crisis and opportunity, one may look to the controversial work of Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz (1999). In *Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument* they develop the thesis that even though Africa appears to be a place of chaos, its social formations have learnt to not only manipulate the crisis, but also to appropriate its discourses and patterns for self-advancement. It is in this context that youth in Africa have been able to define themselves by finding alternative social spaces for self-ex-

pression within a constraining polity. In this sense, crisis (with its informalization of politics, rule of law deficits, and progressively weakening value systems) creates opportunities (for instance for fraud and violence) which when taken by youth often generate further crisis. This is illustrated by the situation in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, where governance deficits in the area of petroleum refining has allowed the emergence of a shadow economy of illegal refineries (crudely constructed and with only rudimentary technology) controlled by armed youth gangs who steal crude oil from pipelines, refine it, and export the products along the West African coast. In this regard, youth seize the opportunity provided by governance deficits to accumulate capital, a significant proportion of which funds militancy and criminality in the region. Durham (2000, 113) makes a similar point about what she describes as "occult economies" where the "potency and potential of youth is extracted to sustain the power of those in authority while young people themselves feel increasingly unable to attain the promises of the new economy and society." In this regard, young people sense the powers they possess for shaping society, albeit in shapes dictated by the elite, and yet feel powerless to do anything about their own lives. They thus increasingly define themselves by working both within and at the same time around the corrupt system.

The failures of governance and statehood in Africa have created societies in perpetual crisis within which legal opportunities for social mobility are, at best, few. This is the case for entire societies, but its expression is surely graver for marginalized social categories like children, women, and youth.

The implications of social marginalization of youth are easily discerned, among other things, in violent conduct (Cruise O'Brien 1996; Utas 2005). This exacerbates generational tensions that often end in further youth exclusion, thus creating a vicious cycle of exclusion and resistance.

Anecdotal evidence can shed light on popular apprehensions about youth in Africa, in the traditional and/or modern contexts, and on how these often lead to social exclusion. In December 2003, a Sierra Leonean academic who had lived and worked continuously in Nigeria since 1978,

was conferred with a chieftaincy title of *Baaluwe* (the leader of the learned people) by the king of a renowned and ancient city in southwest Nigeria. When he was handed the oath of office to publicly pledge his allegiance to the traditional ruler, the first item on the long list of dos and don'ts was that under no circumstance must he conspire with or support the youths of the town to undermine the traditional ruler. By making this pledge, he committed himself to an unwavering loyalty to the traditional monarch, significantly at a time when that institution is contemptuously derided as anachronistic in contemporary Nigerian politics. He also unwittingly committed himself to the defense of a governance structure that not only sees the youth as trouble, but also deems it necessary to exclude them from governance.

In conditions as described above, where economic accumulation is extremely difficult, political exclusion and social decay are rife, and the structures of the state are either too weak or too uninterested to resolve conflict, it is not difficult to see the social crucible that forges violent resistance in youth. As the example we gave above suggests, even informal avenues for seeking redress and expressing opinion appear to be becoming closed to youth, thereby driving more and more into violent conduct. Unfortunately, very few societies have subjected themselves to the kinds of critical introspection that could lead to sincere and open acknowledgements, if not acceptance, of responsibility for the pitiable ways youths are increasingly falling into in contemporary Africa. Rather than critical introspection, most societies in Africa are content with merely constructing conflicting public images of youth. The first of such touts them patronizingly as *the hope for the future*, the other castigating them as nuisances to public order (Waal 2002, 13). Perhaps the only consolation is that no matter the idiom society uses to qualify its youth, there is little controversy that at the start of the present millennium, youth themselves have become central and strategic to the making and unmaking of social order on the continent as the experiences of Liberia, Sierra Leone, Cote D'Ivoire, Tunisia, Libya, the DRC, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Mozambique, and Sudan – to mention but a few of the recent flashpoints – have clearly demonstrated (Abdullah 1999; Richards 1994, 1997; Ukeje 2001; Zegeye 2003; Maxted

2003; Utas 2003). Indeed, there is concern that African societies ought to start guarding against a situation where their worst apprehensions and fears concerning youth may soon metamorphose into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

3. Youth and Conflict in Africa: Violence, Survival and Victimhood

Having provided a broad view of what it means to be young in Africa, we can now go on to examine the specific question of youth violence. Two broad categories of youth violence can be discerned: violence aimed at political goals and criminal violence. Except where expressly stated, we focus more on violence with political meaning. It should be noted however that the line between these two categories sometimes blurs, as the Niger Delta, Sierra Leone, and Liberia conflicts show (Kandeh 1999; Ukeje 2001).

Since the mid-1990s at least, one of the defining features of the youth discourse in Africa has been an attempt to understand the critical interface between youth and violent conflicts. This is not out of place, given the unprecedented involvement of young people in the civil wars and low intensity conflicts that have erupted in states like Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Nigeria. Of course young people have always been involved in violent conflict, with youth forming the bulk of the armed forces in most societies; in recent times however, they appear to increasingly take on the roles of instigators and leaders of violence rather than mere followers (youth-led social movements like the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta, MEND, for example, are notorious for violent engagement with the state and multinational oil companies). It is possible to establish a causal link between this emerging youth role in violence and broader questions about social decomposition, economic crisis, and the critical intersection of the local and the global (El-Kenk 1996; Macdonald 1997; Comaroff and Comaroff 2005; Aluiagba 2009). Deconstructing youth participation in violence in Africa is therefore incomplete without an engagement with this important phenomenon: not only does it demonstrate the deep-seated crisis of (dis)empowerment facing many societies, it also provides crucial insights into the way youth navigate this complex terrain and the weapons or tools they use to do so. The very nature of many of these conflicts, particularly their disproportionate linkage to resource management and

wealth distribution issues, may be a reflection of the attraction of accumulation to a youthful population that has long been excluded from productive engagement within the formal economies. One should however acknowledge, in the first instance, that there is a gendered perception of violence that takes note of gender-specific experiences of youth violence and methods of navigating the dangerous terrains created by conflict. In the first place, it should be noted that gender is all too often conflated with women and girls. As Amani El Jack (2003, 6) notes, however, gender simply “refers to perceptions of appropriate behavior, appearance and attitude for women and men arising from social and cultural expectations.” As a consequence, gendered perceptions of youth in violence must take cognizance of the local context and understandings of gender. Generally perceived notions of youth in relation to violence are, however, almost exclusively male. This is not unconnected to the gendered delineation of roles in conflict societies, which regards female identity in violent conflict in the context of victimhood. This blanket assumption of victimhood however often ignored the crucial role that women play in the outbreak, management, and resolution of violent conflict. As Iwilade (2011, 27) notes, “an ethnography of social tactics in conflict situations easily counters the reductionist portrayals of women as merely passive victims of conflicts.” There are good examples of young women in Liberia and Sierra Leone who acted as combatants in civil wars and some, like Colonel Black Diamond of the Women’s Auxiliary Corps in Liberia, even commanded elite units (Utas 2005, 404).

Notwithstanding the disproportionate emphasis on young men in the discourse on youth violence, there is still some analytical value to examining youth violence in socially separate but mutually reinforcing gender crucibles. Even though disempowerment is a shared misfortune of many African youths irrespective of gender, one may still discern differentiated experiences across gender divisions. For one, young women have unique pre-conflict experiences of disempowerment that provide important insights into how they respond to the dynamics of violence. As Brett and Sprecht (2004, 87) note, young women often participate in organized armed violence primarily to escape domestic violence, abuse, and poverty rather than in defense of relig-

ious or ethnic interests as can often be the case for young men. This indicates that female disempowerment and marginalization by a patriarchal system is a major reason young women participate in violent public conduct. This does not however provide adequate explanation for the methods by which they navigate the geography of violence.

In deconstructing youth participation in violence it is helpful to answer the questions of “why” and “how.” “Why” helps us to understand the specific factors that draw youths into violent conduct while “how” explains the tactics and tools with which they navigate the dangerous geography of violent conflict. Both questions collectively provide important insights into the dynamic engagement of youth with violence in Africa and the implications for social change.

To address the question of “why,” we can apply Murphy’s four models of youth participation in violence (2003, 64–66) and find appropriate parallels within contemporary Africa. The first is the “coerced youth model” which views youth as being brutally coerced into a (violent) military role and thus as passive victims of social upheaval. This model has been useful in providing some explanation for the “child soldier” phenomenon in Sierra Leone and Liberia (Richards 1994, 1997). The second is the “revolutionary youth model” which views youth as rebelling against political and economic marginalization. This model has been used to rationalize the engagement of youths within social movements involved in violent confrontation with the state/multinational oil coalition in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria (Ifeka 2006). The two models differ in what they choose to emphasize about youth participation in violence. In the first model, youth is denied agency as they are framed as unwilling or choiceless victims of a brutal and coercive apparatus of violence. The second fully acknowledges the agency of youth, making sure to point out their deliberate and rational rejection of marginalizing social systems and their creative responses to the opportunities created by social conflict.

The third is the “delinquent youth model” which views youth participants in violent conflicts not as revolutionary idealists but as “alienated and economically dispossessed opportunists exploiting the economic spoils of social tur-

moil” (Murphy 2003, 64). In this case, young people engage in violence in defense of no higher ideal, but rather for the heady adventure of violence itself (the *West Side Boys* in Liberia for instance; Abdullah 1998) or for the criminal benefits that can be derived from conflict (some criminal elements of insurgency movements in the Niger Delta for instance). This model is reflective of traditional notions of youth as a period that is carefree, rebellious, contemptuous of authority, and generally mischievous. It follows a path slightly different from the earlier two, straddling the realms of agency and agenthood. Agenthood here refers to the state of being an agent: lacking independent capacity to take decisions without direction from others. While it acknowledges the choice of youth to participate in delinquent violence, it frames that choice as natural and thus demeans it.

The fourth is the “youth clientelism model” which emphasizes how youth manage their dependency and agency within “an institutional structure of repressive patrimonialism in which their subordination to adults is based on a cruel mixture of brutality, personal benevolence and reciprocity” (Murphy 2003, 65). This model is markedly different from the three described earlier because it focuses on an extraneous factor to explain youth agency in violence: institutions built through client-patron relations. This model is particularly appropriate for analyzing relations between young combatants and the commanders who recruit, mentor, and discipline them within the ranks of rebel movements. The civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone are, of course, poster children for this phenomenon.

The other question of “how” relates primarily to methods and tools for navigating the complex geographies of violent conflict in Africa. It is important to understand that the tactics with which youth engage in or navigate violent situations cannot be explained with a monocultural or fossilized lens. It often involves a series of constantly adjusted tactics, developed in response to the constraints and incentives created, on the one hand by a hostile socio-economic context, and on the other by the immediate consequences of conflict.

One of the main features of youth violence in Africa was insightfully analyzed by Caroline Ifeka (2006) in a study of

the intersection between religion and violence. In that study, she developed a framework for analyzing youth cultures of resistance and violence in the context of customary and world religions in which old and new gods are important sources of ideological resistance (Ifeka 2006, 721). In this context, Ifeka (2006, 725) invariably builds on the “revolutionary youth model” to describe the way religious identities are appropriated as a tool to navigate the complex terrains of violence and resistance. By plugging into religious rituals and rhetoric, youth take advantage of violence and thus gain legitimacy for an essentially aberrant social form. By purporting to engage in violence on behalf of, in the name of, or through the agency of religion and its rituals, youth gain public support or at least acquiescence for what is often essentially violent resistance to a hostile patrimonial system. This method of gaining legitimacy for youth violence is easily discernible in Islamic revivalist movements in northern Nigeria and among the egbesu warriors of the oil communities in the Niger Delta. Of course, it must be noted that this method is often intricately connected to broader questions of culture, ecology, and economics, especially in the case of violent resistance in resource-rich communities like the Niger Delta.

In the context of major armed conflicts like civil wars, violence is in itself often a method to navigate the violent terrain created by war. In this regard, many young people simply join armed groups as a way of gaining some protection from brutal and unforgiving armies (that are sometimes the very same ones that vulnerable youth join). It is thus often a case of “if you can’t beat them, join them.” This tactic for navigating violence has been thoroughly addressed within the literature. The works of Utas (2003, 2005), MacMullin and Loughry (2004), and Murphy (2003) are particularly rich in this with regard to Liberia and Sierra Leone, while Ukeje (2001) and Obi (2006) make similar points about the Niger Delta. As MacMullin and Loughry (2004) note in the case of young women, escaping the heightened vulnerability of women and girls to violent abuse during armed conflict is one of the key motivations that drive many of them to enlist. As McKay and Mazurana (2004) also note, during the 1976–1992 civil war in Mozambique, many young girls joined FRELIMO to get away from the rural areas, to improve their education or career

opportunities, and to expand gender roles for women (issues that had become more difficult as a direct consequence of violent conflict). What these cases show is that violence is in itself sometimes a tactic to avoid violence or its consequences.

While the two navigation tactics discussed above are by no means exhaustive, they provide an adequate description of the broad scope and ingenuity of youth encounters with violent conflict. The implications of growing organized and unorganized violence on the psyche of youth and invariably on the society itself are dire. For one, youth violence deepens the intergenerational debate as well as the conflict therein, as clearly manifested in the *Mungiki* movement in Kenya.¹ It also deepens apprehension about the future of traditional notions of youth and adulthood, as well as raising critical questions about how to find the right balance between these notions and the new forms of social relations imposed by a rapidly changing global capitalist system. Some of these new forms include changes in the political economy of accumulation as a consequence of a growing emphasis on skills now more typically possessed by youth (for example software engineering, social networking, and so on). With violent conflict in Africa now increasingly erupting as a consequence of youth dissatisfaction with their chances for advancement, rather than disagreements within the traditional elite structures (Libya, Egypt, and to a lesser extent Nigeria; Boko Haram in the North and MEND in the Niger Delta are important examples), creating a constructive outlet for youth agency has become a national security concern across Africa.

While the recent youth-inspired violent eruptions in North Africa no doubt happened within specific social contexts, this could, one way or the other, be replicated in many other African countries. It is common therefore to see the discourses around new protest movements in diverse places across sub-Saharan Africa, from Nigeria to Mozambique,

Kenya and Ghana, taking a cue from and compared with the Arab Spring protests in Tunisia, Algeria, Libya and Egypt. This is an indication that these violent youth-led movements have entered into youth imagination across Africa. Such imagination is, however, not as important as the growing youth perception, no doubt also fuelled by the successes in North Africa, that such movements can actually bring about monumental changes in society and politics in many countries. This is the most ominous for established patterns of authority and control on the continent. Rather than simply working to expand opportunities for youth, it appears that the fear of youth losing their “innocence” is now becoming the discourse around which paternalistic social systems across Africa constructs responses to the “youth problem.”

4. Farewell to Innocence: Responses to Youth Violence in Africa

Because the more popular idioms relating to contemporary African youth present them as “troublemakers,” public policy interventions have focused on youths as a set of “bads,” mostly with disastrous consequences. At the broader level, a major consequence is that the dominant public idiom continues to cloud societal judgments on youth and youth-related matters. More specifically, such dominant idioms have totally diminished the remarkable enterprise and resilience of young people at critical periods of society-building and nation-building processes; for instance, the contributions of youths towards decolonization in the 1960s and their popular roles in the re-democratization projects in different countries from the early 1990s. Unfortunately, public discourse tends to suppress, ignore, or devalue such contributions of youths to socio-political development in different African countries. Quite often, the eventual beneficiaries of such developments end up distancing themselves from or working against youth aspirations and needs. This was the situation soon after young people played a frontline role in the decolonization struggles, after which the post-independence

¹ The Mungiki Movement in Kenya was a youth organisation that was notorious for its violent manipulation of generational conflicts and discourses during and after the 2002 general elections. A comprehensive analysis is provided by Kagwanja (2005).

socio-political project was hijacked by the ruling elites in different countries for personal and group aggrandizement. It still is the situation after youths spearheaded the socio-political “revolution” that led to the collapse of one-party civilian or military regimes and the process of re-democratization and democratic consolidation.

Some of the ex-combatants interviewed during earlier fieldwork in Monrovia, Liberia, in 2001 captured the exasperation and anger associated with this “use and dump” politics perfected by Charles Taylor’s regime. As one of them put it, “you cannot use a truck to build a house and not allow it even pass by after completion,” meaning that after all the sacrifices they made during years of fighting in the bush, they would not accept their neglect by the Taylor regime. This narrative of angst certainly played a major part in the emergence of a new rebel group, Liberians United for Reconstruction and Development (LURD) in 2000, and in the manner in which it successfully mobilized disgruntled ex-combatants to launch successful attacks that contributed to the downfall and exile of Charles Taylor. Presently, a similar undercurrent of neglect and disillusionment is driving the recent resurgence of gangsterism and violence in Nigeria’s oil region, especially in Port Harcourt. The main gangs terrorizing the city started their careers as political thugs to help different factions achieve electoral victory during the 2003 gubernatorial elections in the state. With little or no use for them after that election, political patronage for the gangs dried up – but not before they had reformed as organized armed groups engaged in oil bunkering and threatening public order and stability.

What the above suggests is that youth is only considered relevant by society to the extent that it serves the narrow interests of the political and social elite. This exploitative attitude to youth feeds into the discourses of generation and hegemony that shape state responses to youth violence.

These responses can be grouped into three broad and interconnected areas: co-option, exclusion and repression. African states have mostly responded to youth pressures by employing all of these strategies to varying degrees and within specific contexts. Depending on the overall democratic character of governance in the country concerned,

states have shown willingness to clamp down on youth protests and protest cultures and also to shape the youth discourse in ways that frame them as at best troublesome.

The 2009 amnesty deal for militants in the Niger Delta is an interesting policy that shows the deliberate use of all three strategies in response to incidences of youth violence and resistance. As background, it should be noted that resistance in the oil-producing region of the Niger Delta has a long-drawn history rooted in the character and activities of European foreign capital and colonial rule over several centuries. This is the case if one considers the common thread that connects different phases of social disorder in the region since at least the sixteenth century (Okwechime, 2011; Ukeje, 2011a, 2011b). Since the discovery of crude oil in commercial quantities in Oloibiri in 1958, the Niger Delta has grown to become the heart of the Nigerian economy, contributing about 80 percent of all federal revenue. This centrality of oil to the Nigerian economy and, perhaps more importantly, to the revenue accruing to the state, has led social convulsions in the region to be construed as direct threats to national security and even to the very survival of the country. It has also bred social agitations and violent resistance by oil communities who consider their meager receipts from the proceeds of oil exploitation grossly unfair and unacceptable. At the heart of resistance to the state in the Niger Delta are the youth who challenge the state/multinational oil company coalitions and demand a greater share of the resources accruing from oil exploration and exploitation. The generational dimension of the crisis further complicates the situation. In this case, traditional patterns of power and authority are increasingly being violently renegotiated, to the point where young people appear to have lost confidence in the ability of adults to effectively represent and defend their interests.

In response to widespread youth-led violence that undermined the vital oil industry, the government instituted an amnesty program that was meant to demobilize, disarm, and rehabilitate militants in the region. A critical assessment of the actual working of the policy reveals key indicators of the three response strategies mentioned earlier: repression, co-option and exclusion.

In the first place, the discourses that culminated in the amnesty policy were largely shaped by an elite structure that invariably excluded the youth. Obi and Rustad (2011, 204) report that the amnesty program was not the outcome of open negotiations or a formal peace agreement between the government and militants; instead, they were done at the highest levels of government, and involved members of the Niger Delta elite/elders and top government officials of Niger Delta origin negotiating with militia commanders. This implies that from the start, the amnesty was a tool of exclusion rather than inclusion.

We can easily discern a second policy of co-option in the way militant commanders were pulled into the embrace of the state elite, much to the chagrin of many of their erstwhile fighters who were inevitably left in the cold. As Davidheisser and Nyiyiana (2010) note, “while ex-militia ‘commanders’ enjoyed state patronage and largesse, their erstwhile foot soldiers in designated camps complained of the poor living conditions, lack of training facilities and programmes and delayed payment of allowances.” This sort of co-option has left many former militia commanders turning into mouth-pieces and defenders of the state (and the crop of political elites who now control it) against whom they had fought so hard. In fact, there are indications that many of these ex-militia now provide security services to oil companies, defending them against protesters.

The third element, repression, is also evident in the amnesty program and is perhaps best illustrated by the continued militarization of the region. The presence of the Joint Task Force, the armed security force charged with maintaining “order” in the region, is a constant reminder not only to the now co-opted militants, but also to their excluded counterparts, of the might of the state and its willingness to use force to achieve its goals. It is no surprise that since the amnesty program was launched in 2009, there have been reports of indiscriminate extrajudicial killings and harassment of youth all over the region. Similar patterns can be found in DDR projects in Liberia and Sierra Leone (MacMullin and Loughry 2004; Utas 2003) and in attempts at resolving the Boko Haram insurgency in Northern Nigeria (Adesoji 2009).

What these portend for youths is undoubtedly far-reaching. As opportunities for advancement and success fade away, Argenti (2002, 145) reminds us: “as local traditional orders become increasingly intermeshed with national political orders that have lost all legitimacy, young people are challenged to find alternative forms of representation.” Two of these alternative forms of youth representation for example, the growing socialization of youths into the informal sector and youth attraction to radical religion (Spinks: 2002), are not only producing distinctive socialization outcomes but are themselves complicating the matrix of order and stability in contemporary Africa.

Regarding the socialization of youths into the informal sector, for instance, the process seemed to have been aided, if not triggered, by declining family (household) incomes consequent upon the economic crises of the 1980 and after. Such informalization processes are creating street-level socializations, invariably also weakening the tenuous relationship among youth and between youth and family, youth and society, and youth and government. With shrinking access to subsidized socio-economic opportunities, the resilience of the family as the most basic unit for value creation, moral affection, and individual protection becomes threatened and too functionally weak to perform well. This adulteration is compounded by the harsh consequences of the present neo-liberal economic regime, particularly those associated with globalization (Meagher 2003). Another factor is what Ly described as the “eclipse of those traditional forms of solidarity that large kinship groups had generated and sustained” over decades in the continent (1988). As more young people achieve social puberty, therefore, they are confronted with the “fact of life” that they may not have the socio-economic wherewithal to live through this difficult phase of life, at least not independently, and are thus encouraged to evolve into a culture of violence and impunity.

5. Conclusion

What we have done above is to take a broad look at the context within which youth violence has developed in Africa, understanding it as both a failure of governance and a strategy for survival. Four models of youth participation in violence can be easily discerned in Africa. They include “coerced youth” (which denies youth agency by focusing

on factors that force youth into violence), “revolutionary youth” (which acknowledges youth agency and situates violence in state decay), “delinquent youth” (which views youth as economically dispossessed opportunists exploiting social turmoil), and “youth clientelism,” which focuses on how institutionalized client-patron structures shape youth engagement with violence. We also show that youth participation in violence is often a series of constantly adjusted tactics developed in response to constraints and incentives created by a hostile socio-economic context and the immediate consequences of conflict. We identify religious rhetoric as one key normative framework that has been exploited by youth to rationalize violence for and on behalf of “faith” and show that violence is often, in itself, a tactic to escape the implications of violent conflict. We also demonstrate the broad use of cooption, exclusion, and repression by the state in response to youth resistance and violence.

The “youth problem” thus flows from broader social crises faced by the state in Africa. The challenge is therefore chiefly about how to reconstruct African society (and the state) in ways that address the youth crisis as a developmental problem within a holistic framework. In Liberia, there is a Creole word of wisdom that “bad bush no dey for throwaway bad pikin,” literally meaning that there is no bad bush to throw away a bad child. This simply means that one cannot solve a problem by simply wishing it away. In the context of our discussion, this implies that Africa cannot afford to bid farewell to the innocence of youth, but rather needs to acknowledge, accommodate, and come to terms with the challenge they represent for the youth, in the first instance, and the society at large. A major point in this paper is therefore that the “problem” of youth is symptomatic of deeper and festering challenges facing African societies, and must be addressed from this holistic premise. It is important however that the symptom be kept separate from the cause, as it is the pervasive tendency to lump them together that has fueled public concern about the

“diabolical” exploits of youth and driven denial of their resilience. There is an even bigger concern in the twenty-first century, especially in the context of challenges posed by globalization (Hedley 2001). On the continent today, there is now ample evidence that the globalisation process is going to bypass, marginalize or completely neglect millions of people for several decades to come. For those people, a large percentage of whom fall within the social category of youth, according to Gus Speth, as cited by Agarwal (1998), “poverty is a denial of the most basic of all human rights: the Right to Life.” A new preoccupation in national, continental, and global policy debate and action should therefore focus on improving the quality and dissemination of human security, especially for the most marginalized and vulnerable social categories in the world.

There is a sound conviction that young people could reach their maximum potential without migrating to cities or engaging in dangerous social activities if they can secure subsidized access to educational, medical, economic, political, social, and cultural resources wherever they are located, whether in the rural or urban areas. This approach to youth was promoted by the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) between 2000–2005 through its program on “rural youth and food security.” According to the FAO, this must involve giving them the right training and education, supporting programs that ensure gender balance, training youths in leadership, communication, and group activities, and packaging programs of activities that raise the self-esteem of young people, to mention but a few. Youth empowerment means expanding the opportunities available to young people, taking cognizance of their ideas, vision, and skills, and channeling them towards development. It is clear that substantial ground still needs to be covered before African countries can adequately make sense of the concerns, yearnings, and aspirations of their youths, and turn these into the energy and drive necessary to claim the twenty-first century.

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