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YOUTH AND THE SOCIAL IMAGINATION IN AFRICA: INTRODUCTION TO PARTS 1 AND 2

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Youth are an increasingly compelling subject for study in Africa, entering into political space in highly complex ways. To pay attention to youth is to pay close attention to the topology of the social landscape—to power and agency; public, national, and domestic spaces and identities, and their articulation and disjunctures; memory, history, and sense of change; globalization and governance; gender and class. In this introduction to the articles in Part 1 (this issue) and Part 2 (October issue), I draw attention to how youth is constructed as a problematic category and how it acts as a “social shifter” engaging the social imagination, to how youth contributes to generational debates and constructions, and to how consideration of youth challenges our thinking about agency. [youth, Africa, generations, agency]

Recently, Jean and John Comaroff wrote about South Africa that “the dominant line of cleavage here has become generation” (1999: 284) and that youth in particular are the focus of rapid shifts in postcolonial and global economy and society. In the “occult economies” of the region the potency and potential of youth are 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. Across the continent, in Niger in May 2000, a similar sense of a crisis of promise and frustration prompted secondary-school students to riot, burning tires and barricading streets, protesting a shortened school year and the prospect of failing exams.¹ This was only the latest in a series of youth demonstrations and riots that date back to the pro-democracy struggles in Francophone Africa in the late 1980s and early 1990s and widely reported in issues of *Jeune Afrique Économie*. The June 2000 issue of *Scientific American* features a story “Children of the Gun” (Boothby and Knudson 2000). Its lead picture depicts young boys in Congo/Zaire, dressed in khakis and crowned with circlets of leaves from the bush, signs of uncontained power and the undomesticated wild, automatic weapons hanging from their backs—images seen all too often in media representations from across Africa of late. Caught up in these reports are cross-cutting images of youth as victims of circumstance and the manipulations of older people in power, and also images of youth as unruly, destructive, and dangerous forces needing containment. Traversing these notions, youth enter political space as saboteurs; their potential for political sabotage² comes from their incomplete subjugation to contexts and co-opters, and to their own power for action, response, and subversion in con-

texts of political definition.

To argue, as the Comaroffs do, that youth are the focus of a generational cleavage, to examine their potential for social and political sabotage, and to understand them neither as autonomous liberal actors nor as overdetermined victims, we need to examine very carefully three sets of questions. One is the persistent puzzle in anthropology, and indeed in many of the societies these articles examine: what, or who, is youth? For beyond the important observation that different societies do define and demarcate youth differently, even within a society people of a wide range of ages are often treated as youth, and people of a wide range of ages claim the space of youth, at specific times and in specific places. As we ask these questions, we also need to examine very closely the related notion of generations, used by the Comaroffs and others to speak to rapid shifts in experience that create age-conscious cohorts. In sociological understandings the concept of generations links the more static structural idea of age-grades with history and processes that go beyond mechanical life-courses and social reproduction. The concept of generations also speaks to the disciplinary, hegemonic, and counter-hegemonic processes through which social categories (like “youth”) are presented as homogeneous (see Mannheim 1952; Wohl 1979), absorbing and erasing all sorts of differences. And third, we need to ask what kind of political space youth participate in either broadly across cultures or specifically in local understandings, how that participation depends on different kinds of agency, and how that participation comes to challenge, defer to, or sometimes effectively sabotage other political spaces. These questions, salient for studies of youth anywhere, are particularly

sharply posed for studies of youth in Africa. There, the impact of globalization and tensions between continuity and change are particularly acute. Disenchanted states and both decayed and novel institutions produce new spaces for political assertion and the creation of identities. The promise of modernity offers an array of contradictions and disenchantments, and wars and their aftermath leave both continuities and changes to be negotiated.

Youth as a historically constructed social category, as a relational concept, and youth as a group of actors, form an especially sharp lens through which social forces are focused in Africa, as in much of the world. Through this lens, relations and constructions of power are refracted, recombined, and reproduced, as people make claims on each other based on age—claims that are reciprocal but asymmetrical. The symbolic dimensions of personhood and agency take on particular saliency as the nature and roles of youth are debated in domestic situations, villages, or in relationship to national society. Youth figure centrally in debates and transformations in membership, belonging, and the hybridization of identities—memberships in family and kin groups, in ethnic groups, and in the state. Youth are particularly sensitive to transformations in the economy as their activities, prospects, and ambitions are dislocated and redirected. New forms of political participation and authority exclude and include youth in novel ways, and debates about those forms are debates about the nature of citizenship, responsibilities, and the moral, immoral, and amoral nature of social action, issues particularly acute for youth, whose memberships are rapidly changing and multiple. Changing technologies of governance, often shaped through western discourses and the knowledge industries of social science, target and redefine youth through schools and other educational initiatives, through programs on health and sexuality, and through attempts to control population movements. And the movement of western discourses on youth through various institutions and personnel, to which youth are framed both as prototypical consumers and as prototypical social problem, condenses many of the critical issues of globalization and historical conjuncture. Moving through these conjunctures, reconfiguring webs of power, reinventing personhood and agency, youth stand at the center of the dynamic imagination of the African social landscape. While anthropologists have not neglected youth in ethnographies of Africa, youth have too often featured in a supporting role. Youth have rarely been studied as

the central point from which to examine these conjunctures, yet youth, in many regards, are central to negotiating continuity and change in any context. The authors of the following articles took up this challenge for a session at the 1998 annual meetings of the American Anthropological Association, and in doing so open new vistas on society, power, and political life.

People who might be considered “youth” form an increasing proportion of the African population. Fertility rates in Africa seem always to have been high (Bledsoe and Cohen 1993): the United Nations reported in 1998 that the population growth rate in Africa in was 2.4% (as compared with a world rate of 1.3%), with some countries ranging well above 3%. Decreases in infant and child mortality, combined with high growth rates, mean that the distribution of the population is heavily skewed towards younger people. Forty-three percent of the population in Africa in this 1998 report was under 15 years old, and only 5% was 65 or older, again with variation between different countries.³ Shifts in the population distribution curve, and increasing numbers of very young people, may prompt re-consideration of categories of child, youth, adult, or elder. This is especially the case under modern state regimes whose initiatives and whose control over the population depend upon defining it through categories like these (cf. Scott 1998). The appearance of this “modern” state itself, however, is part of an array of changes in the social, economic, political, and cultural conditions that have affected the ways in which people think about age categories, and the ways in which people struggle to recognize themselves in relation to society. It affects the ways they are able to imagine the contours of that society.

Youth have certainly not been absent from the anthropology of Africa, but attention to them has been sporadic and too often secondary. British anthropology, which dominated African studies in its formative period, with a focus upon political order, or upon maximal cultural knowledge, often cast young people in a supporting role. For example, Evans-Pritchard’s classic ethnography *The Nuer* (1940) looked specifically at youth in two ways. First, the songs and names of young people illustrated the general cultural elaboration of cattle in Nuer culture as a whole; here, the imaginative self-creation of young people (primarily males) represented the cultural obsessions of the whole society (see Hutchinson 1996 for more on Nuer youth, including girls). Second, almost as an appendix, in the very last

chapter, Evans-Pritchard described the age-grades into which young men were initiated as a further illustration of the relational structural principles of social order that he had described for lineages and political units. Here, the organization of people into groups related to one another by age relations served to regulate social interaction by organizing people relationally.

Nuer age groups as described by Evans-Pritchard are characteristic of many East African pastoral societies. These age cohorts were created in communal rites and performances that spanned different villages and, sometimes, different "tribes" (see Baxter and Almagor 1978). The same was true of some southern African ones as well (the age villages described by Wilson [1951], where age supplants other forms as the "skeleton of structure" are an extreme form). Meyer Fortes brought the structural study of age into the household. Fortes' (1945) study of Tallensi clans and lineages, which also established patterns for structural social analysis, emphasized the role of elders and the shrines they maintained in sustaining the system of corporate groups that defined Tale social order. Like Evans-Pritchard, Fortes wrote a second study of the domestic sphere. Fortes' (1949) domestic study emphasized the orientations of individuals to others around them, and among these were the important relations of men to their fathers. Within the structure provided by clans and lineages, these relations were characterized by mutual corporate interests and identification—but the structure, from the inside, also set son against father and father against son. The rights and privileges of elders were accomplished through the continuing subordination of sons, and the possibility of lineage segmentation by juniors threatened the unifying practices of the elders. The conflict itself was produced by the corporate and segmentary structure, but the conflict between elders and youth was experienced in individual terms.

Evans-Pritchard's description of initiation as the moment in which age cohorts are created, age distinctions reproduced culturally, and cultural and social identity literally inscribed (in the form of forehead scarification) onto the initiates is consonant with many other studies of how age transitions are constituted in rites of passage in Africa. Such rites are often now supplanted by labor migration, schools, or participation in civil wars. One thinks of Audrey Richards' exceptional study of gender and age in Bemba girls' initiations, *Chisungu* (1956), the various works of Victor Turner, or the more recent

study by Corinne Kratz (1994) emphasizing the performative quality of gender and youth (a quality confirmed in the articles here and in the next issue). Many studies of initiations pursue further the ambiguities and contradictions they enfolded: Jean LaFontaine's (1977) essay, for example, vividly described the arguments over power and knowledge that set initiates off against their elders (see also Comaroff 1985). Marc Schloss' (1988) study of Eling initiations, which take place only every twenty-five years, also described how age categories were associated with certain forms of knowledge, in particular gendered knowledge that gave (categorical) adults the ability to reproduce. His study also raised the problem of how age categories could run into contradictions when older men, not yet initiated into the rights of adulthood, had established a fair amount of economic independence. All of these studies affirmed the long-held anthropological principle that social categories are culturally constructed, and that these constructions are often contradictory. The later ones added the dimension of power: how youth were created through the exercise of power and claims to knowledge of elders. Power was also critical to Claude Meillassoux's (1981) Marxist study of social reproduction, which recalls Fortes' observations on the subordination of the young by the old, but which focuses much more closely on economic relations and on the socioeconomic transformations of colonial and postcolonial economy. In his study older members of society effectively created subordinate groups such as women and youth, and controlled productive and reproductive resources through claims on the labor of these groups (cf. Reynolds 1991, who describes the agency attributed and rights allocated to children in the course of such socioeconomic process).

And so, if youth is both relational and culturally constructed, even possibly a social effect of power, how can we propose it as a general topic for investigation? Some concept of age categories or life stage categories does seem relevant everywhere. One solution has been to define youth with reference to biosocial stages of a universal life course: infancy, childhood, adolescence, youth, and adulthood. But other cultures do not, in fact, link "youth" in particular to biosocial stages—girls may become youth well before the onset of puberty or much later in their 20s, and young males may continue to be youth long into their 30s or 40s. Schlegel and Barry (1991) distinguish childhood as a period of dependency, subordination, and asexual social identity.

Adolescence, tied in variable ways to physiological hormonal processes, is a period of developing sexual identity, increased independence, and learning adult social roles, though often in liminal contexts. Schlegel and Barry then note that “youth,” a period in their schema following adolescence, is not always present and is characteristically an stage of early adulthood, in which people have many of the characteristics of adults but are still not accorded all of the rights and responsibilities. Youth, in this approach, stands out from the preceding periods in that it is entirely a sociocultural construct. And a problematic one: two of the following articles stretch the concept to its very limits. If we take as a rough set of guidelines the idea that “youth” most often are (1) those (either by their own claims, or by the impositions of others) who straddle kin-based, domestic space and wider public spheres; (2) those who have gained some level of recognized autonomy and take up public roles, but are still also dependents and not yet able to command the labor of others as superiors themselves; (3) those who can be expected to act upon their social world and not just be the recipients of action, but whose actions are often conceptualized as straddling (or linking) the social and a-social (biological, natural exotic domains), we conclude (again) with a very shifty category that seems to fit many people at some time but no one consistently. Gottlieb (this issue) asks what might be the lower limit on such a conceptualization, arguing that even infants can demonstrate an agency outside the domestic sphere typically associated with adults, or at least youth. Rasmussen (this issue), on the other hand, examines the shifting space of performance in which youth and maturity can be claimed, in which the way you dance or sing and where and how may do as much as one’s social history or actual age. Furthermore, we must always remember that the local nature, definition, and experience of youth is everywhere and at all times quite different for different gender, class, or occupational groups (cf. Ben-Amos 1994, McRobbie 1991), a point made centrally by Bastian (this issue).

If one of the problems that plagues the anthropology of youth is a consistent definition, we have not, in fact, tried to define “youth” as a universal term for this collection of articles. Margaret Mead (1928) vividly described how the experience of adolescence—a biosocial concept—varied between the United States and Samoa, and between different gender, class, and residential settings in Samoa. And Ariès (1962) questioned the meaning and even exis-

tence of childhood (and youth/adolescence) at other times in European history. While both these studies have been challenged (Freeman 1983; Wilson 1980), their authors set an agenda which many researchers have pursued in different ways in the decades since, especially in youth-conscious studies of western societies. Indeed, since the turn of the century, sociologists, anthropologists, and psychologists have been investigating the experience of adolescence and youth in the west. Historians, in particular, have traced how throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, changes in the structures of the economy, family, local community, and state were refracted in childhood and youth (see especially Gillis 1974; Kett 1977), and how these categories became at once more ambiguous and more the focus of moral, community, state, and indeed disciplinary attention. As Foucault (1979) suggests, youth as they become defined as a concrete category of social analysis become increasingly a socially problematic category, and studies of youth are too often studies of deviance or of problems needing programmatic intervention.

Instead of providing a definition of youth, contributors to these issues think of youth less as a specific age group, or cohort, but as a social “shifter”—a term borrowed from linguistics (see Silverstein 1976; Jakobson 1971; see also Durham 1998). A shifter is a special kind of deictic or indexical term, a term that works not through absolute referentiality to a fixed context, but one that relates the speaker to a relational, or indexical, context (“here” or “us” are such terms). A shifter has the capability of sometimes going further and bringing into discursive awareness the metalinguistic features of the conversation—that is, it can go beyond immediate relationships being negotiated and draw attention to the structure and its categories that produce or enable the encounter. As people bring the concept of youth to bear on situations, they situate themselves in a social landscape of power, rights, expectations, and relationships—indexing both themselves and the topology of that social landscape. They do so not necessarily, as the following essays so trenchantly illustrate, in a static manner, but in a dynamic, contestive, and imaginative way. Shifters work metalinguistically, drawing attention to specific relations within a structure of relations, to the structure itself. This seems to be particularly the case with the mobilization of the idea of “youth” in social life. In recognizing, experiencing, or disputing youth in everyday life, people draw attention to the ways re-

lations are situated in fields of power, knowledge, rights, notions of agency and personhood. In musical performances, youth drama, child abductions for witchcraft, the raising of infants, the healing and converting of the young, or recalling of a youth spent in the war zones (all cases treated in Parts 1 and 2), people speak directly to the question in their societies of what is power, what is agency and of what kinds is it, and how rights are to be negotiated. To imagine youth, and to imagine the concept relationally, is to imagine the grounds and forces of sociality.

One of these grounds that has occupied anthropologists much of late, and has entered focally into studies of youth (cf. Amit-Talai and Wulff 1995), is the concept of agency. Under the influence of a postmodernist notion of the subject, the idea of agency no longer can refer simply to the ability of a person to act autonomously, or to exercise direct power over another. One poststructuralist suggestion is to consider “agency” the act, exercised by people through the various and contradictory discourses through which they are constituted, to “author” a positioned self or person at particular moments or encounters (Davies 1991). Such a concept suits studies of late modern/postmodern youth, and particularly deictical studies of youth, well, and indeed meshes with some earlier conceptualizations. For example, Erik Erikson (1968) posited youth/adolescence as a period in which people experimented with different roles—clearly, in the terms above, an agentive act at the intersection of possible fields of self-authoring. There is a strong flavor of consumerism in this approach (see, for example, Hall and Jefferson 1976), quite appropriate for a world in which consumerist practices and their affiliated (liberalist) notions of the person (see Lipovetsky 1994), self-authoring perhaps, are rapidly globalizing. And it is this consumerist space, and a new logic of the person as agent and author, that shapes the debates and practices of the young people in Stambach’s study (in Part 2, to appear in the October issue) of born-again revival camps. As she points out, there is an ironic counterpoint between assumptions about agentive possibilities for self-creation that allow and motivate born-again movements; but these assumptions parallel the consumerist practices, the overproduction of novel selves, that the revival was attempting to counter.

Warfare is one of the sites where the agentive nature of young people is most ambiguous (see Richards 1996; Mokwena 1992). Are youth victims

or perpetrators of violence? Consonant with the idea of agency as something forged precariously between different discursive possibilities, West (in Part 2) examines how young women who fought in Mozambique reflect on their contributions. They insert themselves into the ideological discourses that shaped the war, and use them to counter attempts to marginalize them from active engagements. But West also challenges the idea that agency borrowed from multiple discursive fields can be finally empowering. For these young women, too many self-authorings in contexts of such overwhelming flux and indeterminacy seem to have undermined their ability to claim maturity and full adulthood after the war. West also raises important questions about how the ex-combatants imagine youth afterwards: are the claims to agency, to youth’s power, and to new generational consciousness easily sustained? How is memory, and particular “memory in the postcolony” (cf. Werbner 1998), part of the constitution of generational consciousness, ideas of youth, and social deictics?

But there are other ways to interrogate the notion of agency and person, as well. It may be a mistake to consider “agency” a unitary phenomenon. Not only may agency link different discursive fields, but it may indeed take different form and be exercised differently in different spheres. The kinds of agency exercised within a domestic space, for example, may differ significantly from the possibilities for its realization and exercise in, say, the national sphere, or in different institutional spaces such as schools (see Nyamnjoh 2000). This is, indeed, a primary lesson of Gottlieb’s argument that babies exhibit some forms of agency associated by us, and by Beng, with adulthood. It is an idea, and a problem, that is addressed, and particularly acutely, I think, by West, Bastian, and Gable (in Part 2). Bastian, for example, describes the struggles and transformations involved in the establishment of schools in Igboland by Christian missionaries. Such schools were predicated upon the creation of a category of young people, or youth, that would be “properly liminal” and subject to the transformative Christianizing initiatives that took place at the intersection of status, novel class formations, and gender. As these initiatives took shape, Christians specifically reconstructed gender, building a group of women converts whose lives were organized around domesticity and assisting their evangelist husbands. The young Igbo women acted through the contradictions of the new generational imaginings: simultaneously trained for

subjection both to their Christian husbands and to the new Christian morality, they were also through that morality encouraged to “wield new powers” anchored in bourgeois domesticity.

Gable, like Bastian and many of the others, connects agency with morality: one of the characteristic acts of Manjako youth in the present and the past has been to exert themselves publicly for a moral local society, an exertion tied to the public and economic services that they also perform. The selfishness of elders, and of those in power or with riches, is counterposed to the interests of youth in the morality of society as a whole (see also Auslander 1993; Niehaus 1998; Argenti 1998). Youth, partially disarticulated from their own domestic realms, partially in them, not yet vested in new ones, are in a highly ambiguous position in relation to these various spheres. In the past in southern Africa and elsewhere, they were expected to act on behalf of the larger society, as warriors, participants in national ceremonial, and contributors to public works (see Durham 1998). But they also could represent the not-quite-socialized, amoral yet potent forces of undomesticated nature—forces drawn upon by others for witchcraft or for rituals of strengthening. Rasmussen writes of Tuareg events in which youth as quite literally a performed phenomenon, evinced dramatically in particular forms of music and ceremony, emphasizes the manner in which youth transcend local social strictures and structures. The musical instruments themselves associated with youth evoke a variety of transcendences, drawing in spirits of the wild, and moving people towards heaven, promoting the blurring of caste boundaries, and inviting associations between kin groups and localities. They bridge the local and the nation/state, and also make connections with the transnational. The capacity to transcend, to draw in the exotic, to forge relations across localities has become central in the rapidly changing politics and economies of the end of the twentieth century.

One of the important fields of power over which disputes, debates, and social deictics take place is knowledge (see, for example, Murphy 1980); the discourse of knowledge and what kind of agency and where it can be exercised is central to all the articles here in Part 1 and in Part 2. In contrast to the stereotype of maturing as a process of gaining knowledge, an Islamic elder (in Rasmussen’s article) depicts his aging as a process of forgetting (and learning): “I have forgotten everything that I did during my youth.” In the twentieth century

forms of knowledge have proliferated, and claims to them, control of them, and attempts to legitimate or delegitimize them are central to discourses of social power, and to the destabilization of arenas in which agency is realized. Burke (in the October issue), in Botswana, sees forms of knowledge at the heart of distinctions and conflicts between young and old. Youth claim extensive knowledge that may or may not be part of seniors’ repertoire—school-based knowledge, knowledge of bureaucracy, scientific agriculture, and the means to “progress.” But they are significantly ignorant of social knowledges that are key to their own success: they see themselves as too “foolish” to vote (even when of age to do so), and unable to diagnose or treat ailments of social origin (notably witchcraft). It is not remarkable then that the most severe disturbances to rock Botswana recently, involving extensive rioting, surrounded the murder of a schoolgirl. Those accused were seeking material “development” through illegitimate means; the clash and engagement of disparate forms of knowledge reveals the new generational cleavages of postcolonial society.

As Wohl (1979) has shown for political and philosophical movements after World War I in Europe, the conceptualization of cohorts and generational experience is deeply embedded in a politics of history (see Werbner 1998). This is a politics of the present in which the past becomes a moral representation and the present held up against it. Claims to the position of youth, claims about the nature of youth, and moral claims about youth are centrally involved in the reinvention of political and social space. They are used to mobilize similar kinds of temporal frameworks, in the negotiations of what *kinds* of power are available and where they can be exercised, and by whom. In the wake of World War I, the discourse of youth, and of the “lost generation” (a term also often used for youth in Africa at the end of the twentieth century, see Cruise O’Brien 1996), was part of the grounds of fascism, communism, and the political struggles leading to the second world war. The discourse of youth is just as critical across Africa today—indeed the recurrence of the term “lost generation” is not insignificant—and the consequences just as great. Youth enter political space as saboteurs—as political actors whose politics is to open up discourses on the nature of society in its broadest and most specific terms. The articles in Parts 1 and 2 are intended to open up discussion of youth in Africa, shaped at the varied and complex conjunctures of power, knowledge, concep-

tualizations of personhood and agency, and the politics of morality and society.

NOTES

¹*New York Times*, 24 May 2000, "Violent student demonstration in Niger despite union appeal." See also Cruise O'Brien (1996) on student strikes for better opportunities.

²I thank Francis Nyamnjoh for suggesting this term and pressing me to articulate more youth's potential to sabotage po-

litical space.

³Statistics are taken from the UNDP web page, www.undp.org/popin/wdtrends/p98/p98.htm, which I read in July 2000.

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