



Introduction: African Youth and Globalisation

Ismail Rashid*

The articles in this special issue of *Africa Development* are mostly the outcome of the panel on African Youth and the experiences of globalisation at the 15th General Assembly of the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) held in Dakar, Senegal from 17 to 21 December 2018 under the theme 'Africa and the Crisis of Globalization'.¹ Five of the articles are in English, and one is in Portuguese. These papers are produced by scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds, encompassing history, cultural studies, anthropology, sociology, and linguistics. The articles are anchored in field research conducted in Cape Verde, Kenya, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Zimbabwe and South Africa, and they tackle issues ranging from youth identity, linguistic practices, marginality, masculinity, gangs, violence, political protests, and youth policies. While the different findings and analyses highlight the specificities of the impact of globalisation on young people in selected African countries, they also reveal certain shared experiences across the continent.

Globalisation is not a new phenomenon. The world has witnessed various processes of globalisation over the last millennium, each generating new movements and networks of people, goods, ideas, and power (Abu-Lughod 1989; Osterhammel and Petersson 2009). The last phase of globalisation, which was characterised by the aggressive expansion of European imperialism and capitalism, produced the trans-Atlantic enslavement of Africans and colonialism of Africa, with profoundly tragic consequences. This current phase of globalisation picked up pace after the collapse of the post-Second World War bipolar world order and the rise of new transportation and communications technology in the 1990s. It promised a more prosperous, freer, flatter, smaller, and integrated world (Freidman 2005). There is no doubt that this wave of globalisation, anchored on a resurgent and neoliberal capitalism, has facilitated faster movement of people, commodities, money, information, and ideas around the world. While it has 'lifted'

* Professor, Department of History, Vassar College, New York. Email: israshid@vassar.edu

billions of people out of poverty, it also pushed billions down into poverty, precarity and marginality. Given its uneven and contradictory outcomes, it is unsurprising then that the current phase of globalisation has generated extensive scholarly debate on its character, dynamics and overall impact (Lecher and Boli 2014).

Utilising different disciplinary lenses and methodological approaches, the contributors to this issue augment the debate on globalisation by uncovering its complex consequences for the youth, state and societies in some African countries. Fridah Kanana Erastus and Ellen Hurst-Harosh, who focus on African youth linguistic practices, see it as enriching rather impoverishing of African urban youth culture. Ibrahim Abdullah, Jacinta Nwaka, Rose Jaji and Redy Lima, foreground how youth wrestle with different forms of marginality and exclusion, resorting to gangs, crime, violence and protests to express, leverage, and contest the terms of their situation. African governments are very much aware of the needs, demands and aspirations of their youth in a rapidly changing world. In her interrogation of the youth policies of Kenya, Ghana and Tanzania, Olga Bialostocka underscores how these governments mediate notions of 'tradition' and 'modernity' in their planning for youth development in a globalising world.

Urban youth in Africa have long been active interlocutors in global popular culture, utilising images, fashion, music and language to fashion their identities (Barber 2017). There is no doubt that the proliferation of new communications technologies, especially the ubiquitous cellphone and numerous social media platforms, has greatly expanded this African youth engagement with global popular culture. Drawing on theories of hybridity, Fridah Kanana Erastus and Ellen Hurst-Harosh demonstrate the different ways in which African youth engagement with global culture are shaping urban youth language practices such as Sheng in Kenya, Tsotsitaal in South Africa and Nouchi in Côte d'Ivoire. They argue that in invoking, reinterpreting and applying global symbols, cultural artefacts and icons in their lexicon, the creators and utilisers of these African youth languages forge identities in which the global and local intersect and are reconstituted in ways that fit their urban contexts. In their textured analyses of the everyday interactions and vocabulary of urban youth, Kanana Erastus and Hurst-Harosh reveal how the global does not displace the local but complements it. Youth emerge in this study as active creators and contributors to linguistic and cultural change and as agents of Africa's globalisation.

In his article, Ibrahim Abdullah also broaches the question of urban youth agency and dialogue with global popular culture, but from the sociological and political-economic context of exclusion and marginality in a restructured

post-war neoliberal state. Abdullah reminds us that globalisation arrived in many African countries on the back of structural adjustment programmes (SAPs), with their fetishisation of market principles, privatisation, and curtailment of state expenditure. While SAPs may have provided some modicum of state functionality, economic growth, and access to new technologies in Sierra Leone, they have not mitigated widespread youth unemployment, marginalisation and exclusion. Abdullah argues that, in this context, marginal urban youths have appropriated global cultural flows and refashioned them into deadly gangs and weapons in furtherance of their survival, rights, justice and citizenship. He emphasises that the quotidian existence of marginalised urban youth in contemporary Africa raises fundamental questions about globalisation and citizenship in the making of subaltern subjectivities.

Jacinta Nwaka similarly focuses on ways in which youth engagement in the ‘criminal’ and ‘traditional’ can also be construed as responses to state ineptitude and the convulsions of neoliberal forms of globalisation. Using a historical lens, she traces the rise in the participation of south Nigerian youth in the revival of traditional shrines and deadly fetish and occult practices. Nwaka does not see these ‘traditional’ religious and spiritual practices as detached from the modernity of globalisation or Nigeria’s postcolonial dispensation. Rather than seeing it as a return to past traditional religions, she contends that these trends are subtle forms of youth resistance to the isolation and the financial and social insecurity engendered by the modern state system in Nigeria, and the impact of the money-making ethos of ‘prosperity gospel’ evangelism over the last two decades.

The interplay between the ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ is also a major strand in Rose Jaji’s examination of how young Zimbabwean men perform masculinities in a restrictive postcolonial political space that is heavily impacted by global contexts, and in which the majority of young people are politically and economically marginalised. She contends that young men respond to the domination and monopolisation of politics by the older generation through a variety of strategies, including drawing on global performances of masculinities as well as co-opting and subverting gerontocratic Zimbabwean masculinities. While some of these strategies include navigating the political party terrain, others involve participation in criminal gangs (sometimes tied to political parties) or using new communications and social media technology to foster civic activism and engagement. The strategies also draw from global trends involving the youth’s engagement in non-traditional political participation facilitated by their dominance of virtual space.

The push from African youth to be engaged in shaping the political direction of their countries is a common thread in many of the articles in this special issue. Redy Wilson Lima's article contextualises the different types of urban youth protests in Cape Verde in the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2008 and deepening social and political problems. Cape Verde, which had separated from Guinea Bissau in 1981 and embraced multipartyism in 1991, was hailed as an example of democracy and good governance in Africa. However, Lima contends that, in the last decade, the country has witnessed the smothering of its civil society, urban insecurity, and significant corruption of public and political institutions. He underscores that many youth groups involved in the last waves of protests in Cape Verde call themselves the children and grandchildren of Amílcar Cabral, and they are advocating for a second liberation and (re)Africanisation of the spirits and minds of their compatriots.

Though postcolonial African governments have long wrestled with how to respond to the needs and demands of their burgeoning youth population, the crisis of the last decades has placed the youth question into sharp relief. Since the early 2000s, national youth policies to support the inclusion and development of young people in Africa have been in vogue (ECA 2017). Olga Bialostocka examines the youth policies of Kenya, Ghana and Tanzania to find out how these governments mediate and articulate notions of 'tradition' and 'modernity' in their planning for youth development in diverse socio-cultural settings. She contends that policymakers see the role of culture, both local and global, as important in young people's lives, and try to produce politically desired alternatives to Western modernity. In comparison to the policies of Kenya and Tanzania, Bialostocka considers Ghana's youth policy to be the most decolonial project of the three in its attempt to disentangle the country's process of transformation from the perceived universality of Western culture.

This special issue highlights CODESRIA's ongoing scholarly engagement with the question of youth in Africa and adds to the body of knowledge produced in previous special issues on the subject. Even as some of the articles in this issue revisit familiar themes on the youth question, they all open up new terrains of inquiry grounded in solid field research. They have offered new scholarly insights on the condition of the current generation of African youth, and hinted at possibilities for policy formulation and strategies that effectively respond to the needs and aspirations of youth in a changing and challenging global milieu.

Note

1. Rose Jaji was not part of the original panel. Her article was specifically commissioned for this special issue of *Africa Development*.

References

- Abu-Lughod, J., 1989, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250–1350*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Barber, K., 2017, *A History of African Popular Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- ECA (Economic Commission for Africa), 2017, *Africa's Youth and Prospects for Development: Regional Situation Analysis*. Addis Ababa: ECA.
- Friedman, T.L., 2005, *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twentieth Century*, New York: Farar, Strauss and Giroux.
- Lecher, F.J. and Boli, J., 2014, *The Globalization Reader*, 5th ed., Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell.
- Osterhammel, J. and Petersson, N.P., 2009, *Globalization: A Short History*, D. Geyer, trans, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

