

Alpern is holding here the thin end of the thread which would unravel the warp of Dahomey's history. Admittedly, anyone who broaches the issue of the Amazons of Dahomey is likely to take a broad sweep of the history of this country. This is hardly surprising when it is recalled that the military of which the Amazons formed the centerpiece was so pervasive of the Dahomean society that an analysis of the growth of this institution will reflect, retrospectively, all the twists and turns of Dahomey's own political odyssey.¹

As a result, Stanley B. Alpern's *Amazons of Black Sparta* stands out as a succinct, yet comprehensive, survey of the history of Dahomey. In its twenty-one chapters of unequal length, this book takes the reader through a panoramic recapitulation of the political history of Dahomey, this well-known West African polity, from its small beginnings in the early years of the seventeenth century to its sudden demise in 1892 at the hands of the French expeditionary force. Alpern is by no means the first writer to give an account of the Amazons of Dahomey.² Yet, his is by far the most detailed and most convincing. The title of the book, which is borrowed from a statement by the English globe-trotter and ethnographer, Sir Richard Burton, may sound misleading on the surface, but Alpern is not in any way delving into a mythical topic.³ Actually, he is at pains to tell the reader that the Amazons about whom he is writing were no figment of his fertile imagination but historical actors whom many nineteenth-century European travellers had encountered during their stays in Abomey, Dahomey's capital.

By recalling, at the beginning of his book, all the unproven stories about the existence of women warriors to be found in history books, Alpern seems to be trying, through the effect of contrast, to ground his own account on fact as opposed to fiction.⁴ No matter how incredible this may look to those who are not conversant with the history of Dahomey, Amazons were no fictional pictures invented by nineteenth-century European travellers driven by the thirst for exoticism, but did really exist in the kingdom. That is what Alpern set about proving by assigning to himself the daunting task of combing all the records left behind by them on this strange but appealing feature of the kingdom of Dahomey (pp. 1-12). In the end, he came up with a very contrasting picture of this celebrated institution. For this reviewer, going through these awe-inspiring, yet fascinating, pages has been a delightful exercise. Truly, Alpern's portrait of the Amazons is a well deserved encomium to the courage and dedication of these intrepid women warriors of Dahomey.

What is exceptional in this account of the Amazons of Dahomey is the author's considerable linguistic competence, which he has put to good use to get easy access to the variegated sources on the history of this kingdom.

The Superwomen of Ancient Dahomey: The World of the Amazons

Anselme Guezo

Amazons of Black Sparta, The Women Warriors of Dahomey

by Stanley B. Alpern

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But, more than the availability of source material, it is perhaps no exaggeration to state that the feather on the cap of this extremely well-written book is the remarkable empathy with which Alpern handled the issue of the Amazons. Unlike earlier writers who depicted them in very dark light, he is prone to stress the peculiar circumstances which helped shape their unnatural character. At times, he goes to all lengths to debunk or justify, by comparison with the situation prevailing in Europe, many misconceptions which over the years have distorted beyond repair the image of the Amazons in Western public opinion (pp. 94-97). In this effort at clarification, Alpern did not shrink from relying, as extensively as possible, on oral tradition. By so doing, he evinced a sense of intellectual boldness uncommon among professional historians. Indeed, some of the latter would frown upon the use of this source as historical evidence, under certain conditions, such as retracing the growth of a political institution which has been suppressed for more than a century.⁵

But, however successful Alpern may be in rendering the Amazons more familiar to our eyes, they still appear very eerie in their outfits. To believe what they are wont to claim about themselves, they are no humans. The grim picture on the book's cover, showing a blood-curdling Amazon holding a rifle with the right hand and the freshly severed head of a man with the left, would suggest that they are rather roaring lions bent on devouring all their master's foes (pp. 114, 120-121). This opinion is borne out by their own asseverations recorded verbatim by European travellers. How did this hyperbole come about? The trope of superman is the image coming readily to mind when considering the issue of the identity of the Amazons. The figure of superman does not belong exclusively to the American folk tale. This rhetorical image is also found in the mythology of the African peoples, which tends to describe the first occupants of any piece of land as being solitary giants roaming the earth, with little connection with their present-day

descendants.⁶ The rationale behind these aetiological stories about giants is to indicate the other-worldliness of the ancestors who set the earth moving. This search of a radical breach between heroes and men is commonplace in the American folktale of superman. Here, the giant traces his origin to an extra-terrestrial planet from which was retrieved the element which served, eventually, to mould his personality.

While adhering to the same logic of a radical difference between heroes and ordinary humans, the 'supermen' of Dahomey were no Martians.⁷ They were, initially, what could be described as being diametrically opposed to men, that is, women. But, in another respect, the American legend of superman has a bearing on the Amazons of Dahomey as well. Indeed, through the miracle of education, the American superman has been enabled to transform his otherness into a force of nature to reckon with. Awareness of the invulnerability he acquired through education sustains his boundless generosity and gears him up to embrace the cause of all the powerless and downtrodden of the American society, if not of all societies the world over.

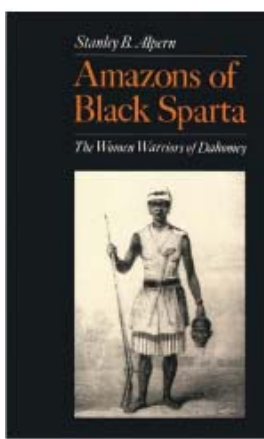
Likewise, by dint of physical training and regular military drills, the Amazons of Dahomey turned their womanhood into a mighty scimitar to smite all opposition to their master, the king of Dahomey (pp. 87-105). The historical records are replete with the physical exertion to which Amazons were daily subjected, just to keep themselves alert and ready for battle at the beck and call of the king. Opinions diverge widely as to the cause of this metamorphosis from women to supermen. For some writers, this is entirely due to the physical qualities of West African women, whose build is more robust than the physical constitution of men and therefore predisposes them to support all kinds of hardship.⁸ Other writers attribute it to the life of celibacy imposed on them. This condition, by weaning them away from sex, has been instrumental in channelling their libido towards extraordinary acts of bravery (pp. 41-47, 159-160). Yet, another group of European writers set a great store by the role played by the consumption of drugs and alcohols in blunting their sense of danger and therefore causing them to take incredible risks (pp. 130-131, 205).

Be that as it may, the Amazons were very well aware of their distinctive traits and they missed no opportunity to

cultivate and stress them. During the military parades and public manifestations in which their regiments were routinely involved, they displayed an *esprit de corps* which was quite astounding by nineteenth century Dahomean standards (pp. 106-131). Such feelings were fostered by the fact that they shared the same abode in the royal palaces scattered all over the kingdom and wore uniforms of the regiment or company to which they were assigned (pp. 132-137). Amazons saw themselves as superior to men, that is, the male soldiers whom they took pleasure in taunting and disparaging whenever the king called a public meeting (pp. 116, 160-162). It is on record that, on such occasions, Amazons pledged total fidelity to the king to whom they swore their readiness to defend the kingdom tooth and nail, far better than the male soldiers.⁹ It was not uncommon at these public meetings to see Amazons openly accusing the male soldiers of being responsible for any crushing defeat the army might suffer.¹⁰

Indeed, on the battlefield, seldom did they turn their backs to the enemy. Their boldness served as an incentive to their male counterparts, who were deterred from fleeing lest the Amazons discovered their act and killed them on the spot. Being an Amazon was, therefore, a harrowing individual decision. But, once taken, it was a decision which was bountifully repaid by the king of Dahomey, who not only ensured a decent living in his palaces for all his Amazons but also showered them with all kinds of gifts during public ceremonies held in their honour (pp. 122-131). All these details and many others can be found in this very informative book which, for the first time, assembled in a single document all the available knowledge spread across travellers' accounts on the Amazons, ranging from their recruitment, training, dresses, entertainment, way of life, *esprit de corps* to their battle formation and equipment. Indeed, the very composition of the book reflects the amount of information the author could glean on each of these headings or chapters. Thus, the longest chapters deal with the battles of Abeokuta and the wars against France on which more information is available (pp. 174-185, 191-207). European eye-witnesses directly recorded the observations they had made on the battlefields. Compared to these lengthy treatments, the two-page chapter treating the origin of the Amazons pales into insignificance (pp. 36-37).

If there is any flaw in the book, it is the trap into which all historians are likely to fall, that is, the tendency to depend too much on their sources for the reconstruction of the past. Alpern does criticize from time to time the unfriendliness of most English missionaries and envoys to Dahomey which affected their writings, but he fails to set his criticism within the overall nineteenth-century European context, which very much determined what they said or did not say about the Amazons (p. 180). The same remarks apply to the twentieth-century female historians



of the Amazons, whose agenda was also set by well defined concerns outside Africa, that is, feminism.¹¹ As one can easily guess, Amazons are simply viewed in these perspectives as mere illustrations of the general debate raging in Europe and therefore appealing to the European readership whom the writings targeted in the first place. But such an approach to the question eventually dimmed any prospect of the perception of the autonomous development of the Amazons as an African institution. This is an epistemological perception of historical change which is rampant in African history. For instance, in most text-books, it is assumed that African institutions underwent no fundamental change until their encounter with the Western world in the nineteenth century.

Seen in this light, the Amazons, whose discipline, dress and organization in regiment, battalion and company recall a modern army, could be perceived as the outcome of some European influence. Alpern suggests an imitation of the companies of European soldiers posted at the Whydah forts or the direct intervention of some Brazilian returnees (p. 52). But why did the phenomenon not arise in the Gold Coast, where European forts were not only more numerous but also more long-standing? Moreover, the Gold Coast also received its fair share of the Brazilian returnees who wielded the same influence on African politics as in Dahomey. The accusation of exoticism levelled at Alpern's book by one of the previous reviewers of the first edition is true, not because he is trying to comply with the rules of a literary genre but because his reconstruction of the origins of the Amazons is quite estranged from the African context.¹² To set the record straight and therefore return to this tradition, there is no other way but to acknowledge the Amazons' perception of themselves.

Arguably, language is one area into which historians can probe in order to rediscover past world views.¹³ In Fongbe, the language spoken in Dahomey, the Amazons are known as *axosi*, that is, king's wives. In other words, the Amazons of Dahomey appeared to be an outgrowth of the patrilinear kinship which characterized the societies of this corner of the world. As is common knowledge, by the mid-seventeenth century, the kingdom of Dahomey had grown into a major political power in the hinterland of the Slave Coast.¹⁴ In this area, patrilinear kinship became prevalent as the main form of political organization. On the Abomey plateau, tradition recalls a stiff competition for leadership between the various patrilinear households. Hwegbaja, the founder of Dahomey, was, initially, a stranger on the plateau who was allied to one of the competing households, that of Chief Koli.¹⁵ This integration into a patrilinear household provided Hwegbaja with the opportunity to wrest from his competitors the ultimate political leadership on the plateau.¹⁶

The anthropologists who have devoted some attention to the evolution

of the kinship system from matrilinearity to patrilinearity and even beyond have always linked this evolution to a change in farming practices or control of a natural resource. In our area of study, cerealiculture has already become a dominant activity by the time of the rise of Dahomey, pushing root crop farming, which was probably initially practised by women, into the background.¹⁷ Moreover, the further evolution of the patriarchal households towards the emergence of kingship was first noticed at the coastal fringe of the Slave Coast, where the Hweda and Hwla laid claim to the exploitation of the salt pans dotting the creeks along the coast. This early kingship was associated with the python believed to be the totemic animal of the Hweda.¹⁸

Probably, the kingship of the python presented less problems of centralization than the kingship of the leopard which was to follow in its footsteps in the coastal hinterland. Thanks to Akinjogbin and Robin Law, we know a great deal today about the internal politics of the kingdom of Whydah.¹⁹ Indeed, the patriarchal households in this kingdom consistently reacted against any attempt at centralization in the wake of the growth of the Atlantic Slave Trade and contributed, as a result, to hastening their own political downfall.²⁰ Learning from this earlier experience, the kingship of the leopard, the totemic animal of the more centralized kingdom of Dahomey, would not brook the competition of any rival patriarchal households. Right from the beginning, the monarchy of Dahomey saw itself on a war footing against the patriarchal households.²¹ Even though it had to strike a deal with some of them, which permitted their association with the exercise of political power, it arrogated to itself the right to behead their defaulting members.²²

But there were probably no better signs of the political supremacy of kingship than the perquisites accruing to monarchy, which were: to include more women and to amass considerable wealth. The *axosi* were part and parcel of this development which we have seen at work in Whydah on a smaller scale. Here, Hufon was said to send his wives as a police force to destroy the houses of his guilty subjects or to settle political scores with his foes (p. 25). This provides an indication of the probable origin of the Amazons. As for their military organization, it is not necessary to look as far as the European forts for clues. Owing to their previous wandering life, the founders of Dahomey probably belonged to a caste of hunters who ranked merit very high in their value system, which they considered to be the linchpin of social organization. Merit is often found at variance with the criterion of age adhered to by the kinship system. This conflict of values was probably the rationale behind the political settlement according to which the throne of Dahomey was always conquered by the most meritorious among the children of the reigning king.²³

In view of this ideology, it was easy to build a strong army exclusively based

on merit. But much as the historian can painstakingly reconstruct a tradition, it is not easy for him to ascertain the circumstances under which this tradition eventually ushered in an innovation. Alpern argues that although female soldiers existed before the reign of Ghezo, he was responsible for their organization into a regular army known as the Amazons (pp. 72-73). There is circumstantial evidence to support his claim. Indeed, the reign of Ghezo coincided with the period of clandestine slave trade when, after the suppression of the Atlantic Slave Trade by Britain in 1807, many African chiefs and kings had to resort to war to keep the supply of slaves flowing to the coastal ports. However, contrary to what obtained in the days of fort trade, the cost of maintenance of captives, pending their shipment, was now shouldered directly by the African suppliers. Hence, the establishment of plantations where slaves were settled to farm their own food.²⁴

All this involved more reliance on the military, not only for their capture but also for their surveillance and safe conveyance to the European ships. To make matters worse, in the political upheaval which followed the collapse of Oyo, the eastern frontier of the kingdom of Dahomey was drawn into a demographic turmoil, the quelling of which was a constant drain on the strength of the regular army (p. 169). Finally, Ghezo came to the throne after staging a *coup d'état* which ousted his predecessor from office, with the help of some members of the Brazilian community of Whydah and the leading representatives of branches of the royal clan.²⁵ We do not know all the terms of the secret agreement between these conspirators. But one of the outcomes of the coup was closer association of the royal clan with the exercise of political power. Henceforward, the constitutional arrangement that kept the princes outside the political arena, allegedly dating back to the reign of Hwegbaja, was breached. From the reign of Ghezo on, it became a normal occurrence to find the princes holding the official positions which were formerly earmarked for members of certain patriarchal households.²⁶

Given these circumstances, which they could have interpreted as a setback to their political fortunes, the patriarchal households could have grown suspicious of Ghezo's rule. With this frame of mind, it is easy to understand that he could have fallen back on his own household in his effort to build a more centralized administration. Hence, the use of women in royal administration. The widely advertised human sacrifices in which the monarchy indulged and the victims of which were mainly men could well be a public display of the feeling of defiance harboured by kingship against the prevailing patriarchal kinship system. The spilling of blood was anathema to this system which held blood relations as the only cement of society. Alpern relates the pathetic episode of the Ketu Amazon who refused to be rescued by her relations after the first Abeokuta war,

preferring the service of the king of Dahomey (p. 164). There can be no better testimony of the extent to which blood relation has been undermined by the new political dispensation inaugurated by Ghezo.

But it takes an exceptionally gifted individual to embark on any institutional reform within a given tradition. Unfortunately, oral tradition has very little to say about the biography of these individuals who could have given the final push to a particular evolution, except a vague allusion to their identity as foreigners.²⁷ Perhaps, at this juncture, I should turn to the existentialist French playwright, Jean Paul Sartre, for answers. Obviously, there are so many common points between Abomey, the capital of the Black Sparta described here by Alpern, and the city of Argos chosen by Sartre as the location of his play but which was actually taken from Greek mythology. The 'Mouches', the title of the play the analysis of which I propose as a conclusion of this review, stand as a metaphor for human condition.²⁸ In this play, Jean Paul Sartre has tried to answer, in the suggestive manner which characterizes his style of writing, the vexed question of innovation within a given tradition.

Abomey and Argos are both slumbering under the weight of past memories, symbolised in the play by the flies for whom there have already been outlined a particular destiny from which there can be no escape. In both cities, repentance and remorse dictate their law as every year on a particular date all the dead are called back to life to take part in a celebration in their honour. On this occasion, the high priest of Argos conjured them up from a deep pit by rolling aside the block of granite which had closed for a year its entrance so as to set them free in order to haunt the living. This forlorn state of affair is better described as the invasion of the flies which stand for the Erinyes, these little deities of remembering which constantly harass human beings. Abomey also had to come to terms every year, during the annual customs, with its flies when the orgy of decapitation attracted millions of them into the ditches of the city where the corpses of the victims of human sacrifice were dumped.

The people of Abomey, like the inhabitants of Argos, had to placate their dead by sacrificing to them because they could not get rid of their false consciousness or sense of guilt which they wore as a badge of their identity. In Argos, Egisthe, their king, imposed these ceremonies fifteen years earlier when he brutally assassinated Agamemnon, his predecessor, to marry the queen, the beautiful Clytemnestre. The casualties of this crime were many. Although Electre, the daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestre, was spared from the general slaughter which ensued, she was kept in the palace as a virtual servant of the royal couple whose dirty clothes she had to wash. Her brother, Oreste was not so lucky. As a boy, likely to avenge the death of his

father when he grew up, he was doomed to be physically eliminated. But the servants to whom this gruesome task was entrusted did not discharge it but rather sold the little boy to some merchants who took him to Athens where he was brought up as a prince with the help of a pedagogue. Even though Oreste spent his youthful years away from Argos in an atmosphere quite bereft of remorse, through the power of destiny he was driven ineluctably by an invisible hand back to this sad place.

Indeed, as a foreigner living among people with no historical connection with him, he felt very inconsequential. He hankered after a more weighty existence which only a sense of belonging can provide. On the contrary, Electre, his sister who was raised in the precincts of the palace but with the consciousness of her condition, was very well aware of the falsehood of the state ideology of repentance which robbed the people of Argos of the joy of life. When the opportunity was given her to address the people, she pressed them to change their ways and enjoy the good side of life. But her effort was in vain as they severely rebuked and threatened to kill her. She could not sound convincing, simply because she was speaking to them from within. Jupiter even deeply resented her attempt to open the eyes of the people because repentance and remorse are necessary evils to keep law and order, not only on earth but also in heaven.

In any case, when it came to the crunch, that is, when under the power of destiny, Oreste returned home and was led to rid the country of its persecutors, the royal couple. Electre failed to walk the extra mile with him, even though they had both agreed on the necessary steps to take in order to reach their goal. She was overwhelmed by a sense of guilt and a feeling of remorse for taking part in the murder of her own mother. On the contrary, Oreste, as a stranger, felt lighter. He could not relent on his urge to carry out what they both resolved to achieve. He was propelled by no feeling other than revenge. The lesson to draw from this

wonderful story is that innovation within a given tradition is a matter for the individual or stranger. The individual is a social outcast, that is, etymologically, a disturbed person. Whether he is an outcast within or without, he is ultimately estranged from his community.

But because the stranger is not bogged down in his actions by remorse and repentance, he can contemplate all the pros and cons of an innovation. No wonder that in African history, the founding fathers are always perceived to be of foreign extraction. Can we draw a parallel between Ghezo and Oreste? Tradition has it that Ghezo and Adandozan, his predecessor on the throne, were brothers, sons of the same father, Agonglo. In this version of the events, Ghezo is depicted as the younger brother to whom the throne was destined when he reached maturity. Meanwhile, Adandozan, as a regent, is said to rule on his behalf. But Akinjogbin casts doubt on this allegation and points out that, given the conditions in which Agonglo found his death and the relatively little difference between their ages, they might be distant cousins belonging to two branches of the royal clan.²⁹ This is plausible. Adandozan even survived Ghezo. But if they are not brothers of the same father, the nature of the links binding Ghezo to the household of Agonglo remains to be proven. Perhaps, it is not too far fetched to assume that, in the early nineteenth century, Dahomey had reverted to the same situation of competition between patriarchal households as in the days of Hwegbaja. The decline of the Atlantic Slave Trade in the late eighteenth century could have deprived kingship of the material means of sustaining its supremacy over kinship and paved the way to the restoration of their former autonomy to the patriarchal households. Likewise, the household of Agonglo stood in the same position vis-à-vis Ghezo as that of Koli vis-à-vis Hwegbaja. Presumably, reading this treatise on the Amazons with an eye on institutional innovation is like stirring up the hornet's nest of the contrived official memories of Dahomey.

Notes

1. See Thomas C. Maroukis, 1974, 'Warfare and Society in the Kingdom of Dahomey: 1818-1894', PhD dissertation, Boston University.
2. See Hélène d'Almeida-Topor, 1984, *Les amazones : une armée de femmes dans l'Afrique précoloniale*, Paris; Amélie Dégbélo, 1979, 'Les amazones du Danxome 1645-1900', Mémoire de Maîtrise d'Histoire, Université Nationale du Bénin; Edna Grace Bay, 1983, 'Servitude and Worldly Success in the Palace of Dahomey', in Claire C. Robertson and Martin A. Klein, eds., *Women and Slavery in Africa*, Madison, 340-67, and Edna G. Bay, 1998, *Wives of the Leopard, Gender, Politics and Culture in the Kingdom of Dahomey*, Charlottesville and London: University of Wisconsin Press; Robert B. Edgerton, 2000, *Warrior Women : The Amazons of Dahomey and the Nature of War*, Boulder.
3. See Sir Richard Burton, 1966, *A Mission to Gelele, King of Dahome*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, p. 322. See also Alpern, p. 37.
4. See Alpern, Introduction, pp. 1-12.
5. In the index to this book, Alpern quoted Dégbélo Amélie, whose thesis was largely based on oral tradition, as many as twenty-two times.
6. See all the entries on the American folk tale of the superman on Wikipédia.
7. *Ibid.*
8. See Burton, pp. 111-112.
9. See Burton, pp. 163-64.
10. See Forbes, II, pp. 92-104. See also Alpern, p. 118.
11. For instance, Edna Bay, in her classic study of palace women of Dahomey, did not expatiate on the women warriors probably because she saw them as examples of masculinisation of female qualities.
12. See Preface to the second edition, p. XII.
13. See Jan Vansina, 1990, *Paths in the Rainforests, Toward a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa*, London: James Currey, pp.9-16.
14. See I.A. Akinjogbin, 1967, *Dahomey and Its Neighbours, 1708-1818*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 37-38.
15. See A. Guézo, 1989, *The Slave Coast and the Europeans, 1700-1820*, unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Birmingham, pp. 62-63.
16. *Ibid.*
17. See Joseph C. Miller, 1976, *Kings and Kinsmen, Early Mbundu States in Angola*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, pp. 1-28.
18. See Falcon, Rvd Père Paul, 'Religion du vodun', in *Etudes Dahoméennes* (Nouvelle Série), numéros 18-19, juillet-octobre 1970, pp. 66-70 for Dangbe and pp. 70-72 for Agasu (Leopard).
19. See Akinjogbin, 1967, pp.47-48, and Robin Law, 'The Common People were Divided': Monarchy, Aristocracy and Political Factionalism in the Kingdom of Whydah, 1671-1727' in *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 23/2 : 201-29.
20. Robin Law, *op.cit.*
21. See Akinjogbin, 1967, pp. 68-109.
22. See Robin Law, 'My Head Belongs to the King': On the Political and Ritual Significance of Decapitation in Pre-colonial Dahomey' in *Journal of African History*, 30/3 : 399-415.
23. See Mercier, P., 1962, *Civilisations du Bénin*, Paris, Société continentale d'éditions modernes illustrées, p. 122.
24. See Edna, Bay, p. 188.
25. See Akinjogbin, pp. 198-199.
26. See Glèlè-Ahanzo, Maurice, 1974, *Le Danxome*, Paris, Nubia, pp. 142-43.
27. See Miller, Joseph C., 1976, *Kings and Kinsmen*, p. 277.
28. See Jean Paul Sartre, 1947, *Huis Clos* suivi de *Les mouches*, Paris, Gallimard, pp. 147-245.
29. See Akinjogbin, p. 199.



Negotiating the Livelihoods of Children and Youth in Africa's Urban Spaces

Michael Bourdillon

This book deals with problems facing children and youth in African cities today. African populations have high growth rates and, consequently, relatively high proportions of young people. Population growth in rural areas has stretched resources leading to urban migration and a rapid growth of cities. Economies have not grown apace with the population; and in some countries, economies have even shrunk. The result is a severe lack of resources in cities to meet the needs of the growing populations, shown in high unemployment, inadequate housing, poor services, and often extreme poverty. All the essays in this book draw attention to such urban environments, in which children and youth have to live and survive. The title of this book speaks of negotiating livelihoods. The concept of 'livelihood' has been adopted to incorporate the social and physical environment together with people's responses to it. It considers not only material, but also human and social resources, including local knowledge and understanding. It, thus, considers the material means for living in a broader context of social and cultural interpretation. It, therefore, does not deal only with material and economic existence, but also with leisure activities, entertainments and other social forms of life developed by young people in response to the dictates of the environment. The book contains country-specific case studies of the problems faced by youths in many African cities, how they develop means to solve them, and the various creative ways through which they improve their status, both economically and socially, in the different urban spaces. It recognizes the potentials of young people in taking control of their lives within the constraints imposed upon them by the society. This book is a valuable contribution to the field of child and youth development, and a useful tool for parents, teachers, academics, researchers as well as government and non-government development agencies.

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