

Children and Youth in Africa: Agency, Identity, and Place

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Extract from the introduction to the volume:

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In Africa, young people constitute the majority of the population and are at the center of societal interactions and transformations. Yet children and youth are often placed at the margins of the public sphere and major political, socio-economic, and cultural processes. The challenging situation on the continent today makes young people particularly vulnerable. Many have little or no access to education, employment and livelihoods, healthcare and basic nutrition. Over the past two decades, political conflict, armed violence, and the HIV/AIDS pandemic created a crisis of unprecedented proportions for younger generations of Africans. Within this stressful environment, how do young people organize and make sense of their daily lives? How do they negotiate their private and public roles and envision their futures?

The book *Makers and Breakers. Children and Youth in Postcolonial Africa* addresses the dynamics of both local and transnational forces that are affecting African young people today. It examines children and youth as plural and heterogeneous categories, with varied and multifaceted experiences and expectations. In addition to interrogating the meanings of childhood and youth in particular social contexts, the contributors to this volume look at young people as a window to understanding broader socio-political and economic transformations in Africa and explore the ways in which these processes of change shape and are being shaped by the young. Despite all the difficulties they face, young people in Africa are actively participating in social, economic, and political developments and, in the process, constructing their own identities. They are often viewed simultaneously as creative and destructive forces. Indeed, youth have been at the forefront of major social transformations, whether in politics, economics, religion, popular culture, or community building. Young people often shape and express political aspirations in surprising ways. They are at the frontier of the reconfiguration of geographies of exclusion and inclusion and the categories of public and private. As Diouf notes in his postscript to this volume, young people in Africa have the capacity to fracture public space, and reinvent or even bypass it, in the same way they shattered the nationalist projects of the post-independence state. In economic terms, children and youth are major players in new informal economies and processes of globalization, as well as in the delineation of alternative local forms of modernity. As Christian fundamentalism and other religious movements flourish all over Africa south of the Sahara, young people are at the forefront of movements that embody the expectations and promises of millennial capitalist ideals. Creative and innovative forms of popular culture— theatre, arts, music and dance—are often the exclusive domain of the young as they create, reinvent, and domesticate global trends into local forms. Finally, in terms of community building, children and youth are important actors in redefining and restructuring existing models of kinship and moral matrices of reciprocity and solidarity. More than anyone else, they are the ones who undergo, express, and provide answers to the crisis of existing communitarian models, structures of authority, gerontocracy, and gender relations. Children and youth are the focal point of the many changes that characterize the contemporary African scene, afloat between crisis and renewal.

The contributors to the *Makers and Breakers* volume have attempted to analyze how young Africans today experience the ruptures and breaches in their lives brought about by historical processes of colonization and decolonization, the state of civil war, and the mechanisms of global capitalism. How do they integrate disruption and fragmentation into their own lives? What collective fantasy spaces do children and youth claim for themselves? How is their social imagination constructed (Durham 2000), and how does this inform us about their outlook on life, their understanding, interpretation, and formulation of the worlds in which they live? In what ways do their social positions differ from those young people held in the past? How do they relate to tradition? Which are the social ‘theatres’ in which moments, points, and places of renewed identity formation and reintegrating rites of passage are being shaped?

The voices, views, and visions of young people themselves still wait to be heard and considered. We know remarkably little about them. Children and youth, in Africa as elsewhere, have often remained our ‘silent others’, our voiceless *enfants terribles* (Caputo 1995; Gottlieb 2000; Hirschfeld, 1999, 2002). They are often constructed from the outside and from above as a ‘problem’ or a ‘lost generation’ (Cruise O’Brien 1996) in ‘crisis’ (Everatt and Sisulu, 1992). Ethnographies of childhood and youth often revert to a traditional pre-postmodernist approach to describe people who are unable to reach influential audiences themselves. Children have rarely been listened to, and when their voices are not silenced, their talk is never unconstrained. Children’s voices reach a broader platform only in rare, and sometimes tragic, cases, but even then these subaltern voices are often immediately recuperated, transformed, and inserted into different narratives and agendas set by other interest groups. However, despite these exclusions, many young people in Africa have demonstrated tremendous creativity in making a living for themselves in a climate of social instability and endemic conflict. We should seek to illuminate this capacity for creativity, which even adverse conditions have not stifled.

Children, Youth, and Society

A fundamental paradox one should address is: how can we understand children and youth in various African contexts as both *makers* and *breakers* of society, while they are simultaneously being *made* and *broken* by that society? How can we situate their lives in the present, grasp the meanings revealed in their shaping of a future, and ground both in an understanding of the past? None of these aspects of young people’s lives can be adequately understood if examined in isolation. This ensemble of influences reflects the full complexity of the interaction between the child, the family, the society, and the world. A myriad of factors make childhood and youth highly heterogeneous categories in terms of gender, class, race, ethnicity, and political position, as well as age. These categories intersect in multiple, often unexpected, ways and interact on different planes simultaneously. As ‘makers’ of society, children and youth contribute to the structures, norms, rituals, and directions of society while also being shaped by them. They make themselves, through inventive forms of self-realization and an ingenious politics of identity (De Boeck 1999a; Biaya in this volume), and they make society by acting as a political force, as sources of resistance and resilience, and as ritual or even supernatural agents and generators of morality and healing through masquerade and play (Argenti 2001; Cartry 1978; Drucker-Brown 1999; Gottlieb 2000; Goldman 1998). On the other hand, they appear as ‘breakers’ in various ways: as risk factors for themselves through suicide, drug use, alcohol, and unsafe sex; by breaking societal norms, conventions, and rules; sometimes by breaking limbs and lives; and

sometimes by breaking the chains of oppression, as the role of young people in fighting South African apartheid so powerfully illustrated. Young people constantly shake and shape society but are also shaped and shaken by it. Finally, children and youth are pushed, pulled, and coerced into various actions by encompassing structures and processes over which they have little or no control: kin, family, community, education, media, technology, the state and its decay, war, religion, tradition and the weight of the past, and the rules of the global market. In the process they are frequently broken, put at risk, and destroyed by unemployment, exploitation, war, famine, rape, physical mutilation, poverty, homelessness, lack of access to education and medical facilities, and HIV/AIDS (Dawes and Honwana, 1996; Honwana 1997; Scheper-Hughes and Sargent, 1998).

Children and youth are extremely difficult to grasp and pin down analytically. They are at once an 'emerging influence' and 'submerged by power' (Coulter 1998). They may be targets, students, servants, orphans, street children, combatants, healers, onlookers, political activists, entrepreneurs, artists, or witches, and they often occupy more than one position at once.

Disregarding this multiplicity in the positions of young people, children and youth have been routinely portrayed as innocent and vulnerable, in need of adult protection. Children and youth are often perceived through opposition to adulthood and as 'people in the process of becoming rather than being'. This view predominates in international law on children's rights (Ennew 2002). The need to establish global standards of child protection led to the universalization of a specific definition of childhood. Several international agreements define a child as anyone below the age of eighteen (UN Geneva Conventions; UN Convention on the Rights of the Child; The African Charter of Rights of the Child). Here, children and youth appear as pre-social and passive recipients of experience. They are portrayed as dependent, immature, and incapable of assuming responsibility, properly confined to the protection of home and school (Thomas, 2000). This concept developed among the middle class in Europe and North America and has been universalized in such a way that youngsters who do not follow this path are considered either to be at risk or to pose a risk to society. Children who are 'out of place' (Connolly and Ennew, 1996), who do not readily fit within Western cultural fantasies of children as innocent and vulnerable, are quickly perceived as demonic, discontented, and disorderly and are often feared and punished as a consequence. Parents who do not follow normative Western child rearing practices are immediately seen as irresponsible (Levine, Dixon et al., 1994).

As Bourdieu reminds us, youth is 'just a word' (Bourdieu, 1993). We understand childhood and youth to be historically situated social and cultural constructions (Ariès 1962; James and Prout, 1990). The concept 'youth' is, to adopt Durham's phrase, a 'social shifter': it is a relational concept situated in a dynamic context, a social landscape of power, knowledge, rights, and cultural notions of agency and personhood. According to Durham, 'to imagine youth, and to imagine the concept relationally, is to imagine the grounds and forces of sociality' (Durham 2000:116). Definitions and notions of children and youth cannot, therefore, be simply based on biology or chronological age. They do not denote a fixed group or demographic cohort (Aguillar 1998; Kurimoto and Simonse, 1998). Such social and cultural variables as gender, religion, class, responsibilities, expectations, race, and ethnicity play important parts in defining who is regarded or considers themselves as a child or youth—and the ways young persons are perceived do not necessarily coincide with their self-definitions. The process of transition between childhood and youth and the period when youth ends and adulthood begins are not the same everywhere; they vary across and within societies and cultures over time. In Africa, very few children and youth enjoy the luxury of being taken care of by their parents or the state until

they reach the age of eighteen. Many are expected to work and assume social responsibilities at an early age (Reynolds 1990). They participate actively in productive tasks, paid labor, household chores, and taking care of younger siblings (Riesman 1992). Children and youth learn by participating in social and economic processes. This participation takes place in post-colonial conditions that tend, in the formal political and economical domain, to marginalize them and to offer few opportunities. It is part of the African doxa to see young people as strong and resilient; they are often portrayed as survivors who actively grow on their own even under difficult conditions (Gibbs 1994; Honwana 1998; Reynolds 1996). In these societal constellations, children and youth are synonymous with wealth because of the contribution they make to the productive work of family. Children and youth are also valued as a source of future security. Children remain significant in kin-based societies where social health and well-being, as well as status and success, continue to depend not only on wealth in things but also on wealth in people.

Young people constantly cross the frontier between childhood and adulthood. As they actively create and recreate their roles in the face of changing conditions, they blur that social divide. For example, many children and youths are drawn into wars and less structured forms of politically motivated violence, acting as soldiers, spies, bodyguards, and commandos. Child soldiers in Sierra Leone, Uganda, the two Congos, Angola, Mozambique, Liberia, Sudan, and Ethiopia provide striking examples of this assumption of roles once reserved for adults; Abdullah and Bangura, 1997; Bazenguissa-Ganga 1999; Dodge and Raundalen, 1987, 1991; Furley 1995; Honwana, 1998, 1999a, 1999b; Peters and Richards, 1998; Richards 1995; Straker et al., 1992; Utas 2003; Cohn and Goodwin-Gill, 1994; Machel 1996; Marten 2002; Scheper-Hughes and Sargent, 1998; Suarez-Orozco 1987). Across the continent, the HIV/Aids pandemic has left many orphans to fend for themselves and assume such adult responsibilities as running households and communities (de Waal and Argenti, 2002).

In Africa, until recently, forces of rebellion emanating from children and youth, as from other subaltern groups such as women, were structurally embedded in social dynamics by which ritualized moments of anti-structure channeled these counter-currents and strengthened the social equilibrium through a pleiad of rites of passage and other rituals of initiation or age-grade associations (Richards 1956; Turner 1967). In Africa, the counter-hegemonic reversal of roles and behavior associated in the West with adolescence and teenage counter-culture were liberated, socially channeled, and ritually embedded within the overall social system. In this way, rather than threatening society, forces emanating from liminal moments and spaces reinforced and replenished the societal whole. In this respect, one could even say that a social category 'youth' or 'adolescent' did not exist in the African context. The question which then arises is whether the recent emergence of 'youth'—with its multiple subcultures expressed in terms of dress, music, specific modes of violence, and the emergence of new cooperative units such as gangs and 'écuries' which have replaced more traditional kin-based, ethnic, and multigenerational associations—is linked to a more general societal crisis in which the processual transformations from boy to man and from girl to woman have lost their taken-for-granted status and social significance. When and how have young people become a 'problem' or a 'lost generation' in the African scene? When and how have conflict, social tension, and rebellion become signs of a crisis of youth (Richards 1995) rather than that age-group's normal condition, expressed and ordered to reinforce the societal order? What does it mean when disempowered youths force their way to the center of society and when their subaltern grammar of protest becomes the leading one? In order to understand these

transformations, we need to reassess the conflict analysis model propagated by Gluckman and the Manchester school (Jabri 1996). We must move beyond Gluckman's processual framework to a more action-oriented analysis of young people's individual strategies and aspirations while simultaneously placing individual actors in a broader, diachronic social context.

If youth is commonly perceived in the process of becoming rather than being, then young people are in a perfect position to navigate and control the new geographies and chronologies of globalization. As Harvey has pointed out in his germinal work on *The Condition of Postmodernity*, globalizing forces are played out in accelerating and intensifying rounds of space/time compression. Time becomes spatialized, annihilating place as the site of being (Harvey, 1989, 2000). When the Comaroffs describe young people's use of the internet as a new form of transnational activism which transforms local places of youth expression into a global cyberspace, they refer precisely to youths' ability to tap into globalizing spatial politics as a newly found source of power. But the majority of Africa's young people are still excluded from participation in this new transnational form of empowerment. For many young people in Africa, the possibilities of becoming seem constantly curtailed by cultural, political, and economical constraints that work hegemonically to pin them down to localized place and imprison them in a precarious and fragile state of being (Henderson 1999; Jewsiewicki and Letourneau, 1998).

Globalization, Pain, and Agency

In August 1999, the frozen bodies of Yaguine Koita and Fodé Tounkara, two fourteen-year-old boys from Conakry, Guinea, were discovered hidden in the landing gear of a Sabena aircraft at the Brussels international airport. On one of the bodies was found a letter addressed to Europe's political leadership, addressing an eloquent plea to the powerful for a better life and a more hopeful future for Africa's youth. Here is an extract from their letter:

Gentlemen, members and leaders of Europe, we appeal to your solidarity and kindness to help Africa. Please help us, we are suffering enormously in Africa, we have problems, and some weaknesses with regard to children's rights ... we have war, disease, lack of food etc. ... in Guinea we have many schools but a big absence of education and training. Therefore, if you see that we are sacrificing ourselves, and expose our own lives it is because we are suffering a lot in Africa, and we need your support to fight poverty and end war in Africa. Nevertheless, we want to study and we ask you to help us study so that we can live like you in Africa. Finally, we beg you to accept our apologies for taking the liberty to address you this letter, because you are eminent personalities, which we ought to respect.

The tragic story of Yaguine and Fodé makes one read with different eyes Wole Soyinka's poem, "The Children of This Land" (Soyinka 2000):

The children of this land are old.
Their eyes are fixed on maps in place of land.
Their feet must learn to follow
Distant contours traced by alien minds.
Their present sense has faded into past.

A year after their tragic death, Yaguine and Fodé had become ‘symbols for all the youth in the country’, said Thierno Diallo, editor-in-chief of *Le Lynx*, a local weekly in Conakry. In Belgium, a memorial banner with the whole text of the boys’ message was put up against the wall of a house in the middle of Brussels, near a government building that houses asylum seekers from all over the globe. The Togolese novelist and playwright Kangni Alem devoted a play, *Atterrissage*, to the two boys (Kangni Alem, 2002). Their letter continues to be debated (Ferguson, 2002).

Confronted with young Africa knocking loudly at the doors of ‘Fortress Europe’, the West must reflect on its own strategies of inclusion and exclusion. We must understand the hopes and dreams, the despair and tears of those whom Europe pushes to the periphery. The increasing participation in global and diasporic movements in the West, made African children and youth important subjects of social inquiry (Ly, 1988). The deaths of the two boys from Guinea, as well as the sad fate of many young diasporic Africans in the West, all unfortunate members of the new ‘alien-nation’ (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1999), echo the dilemmas and struggles that children and youth face on the African continent. Why are these young Africans so powerfully attracted to the West? What is their vision of a good life? What is their cultural politics, and in what geographies, ecologies, and subjectivities is it located and imagined?

Where is the ‘lieu identitaire’, the ‘geography’ in which African youth’s agency is situated? (Collignon and Diouf, 2001; Létourneau 1997; Skelton and Valentine, 1998; Stephens 1995; Wyn and White, 1997). Often, as in Yaguine and Fodé’s case, an imagined topos or the Idea of the West is situated elsewhere, effectively placed outside of the reach of most young people within Africa, but creatively reinvented, captured, and domesticated by them both in and out of Africa. Significantly, Yaguine and Fodé mention that they want to ‘live like you (Europeans) but in Africa’. This revealing phrase expresses the deep tension between the mimetic and the impulse to transplant this elsewhere into home.

In his chapter on barbershops in Arusha, Tanzania, Weiss illustrates how the iconic global world that is staged around these shops is not only mediated by the West’s imperative gaze but also authored by young people themselves. Similarly, the *sapeurs* of Brazzaville and Kinshasa claim and ‘tame’ the West through their appropriation of what they ironically call *bilamba mabe*, ‘wicked clothes’, or French, Italian, and Japanese designer fashions. Through a political economy of elegance, they refashion the West in their own terms (De Boeck 1999a; Friedman 1994; Gandoulou 1989; Gondola 1999; Yoka 1991).

On the one hand, then, the dreams, stories, and imaginaries of the diasporic experience and the West clearly illustrate that young people in Africa are not merely passive victims of the societal crisis that pervades the worlds in which they grow up. Rather, it illustrates the fact that they are searching for their own ways out of a life that they feel to be without a future. Such a perspective on young people’s economies of desire in relation to the West continues, however, to lock African youth into the dynamics of the mimetic, into discourses of loss and absence, and into the displacement and dislocation of local desires. As Seremetakis has rightly pointed out, ‘The discourse on loss, which offers no alternatives, empties the neo-colonial site of all internal content, leaving it an empty and receptive shell for external cultural colonization. Thus the ideologies of loss and crisis in the neo-colonial periphery are an integral part of the political logic of mimetic modernization’ (Seremetakis 1994: ix; De Boeck 1999b). By this logic, the Western cultural model of childhood and youth, with its music, tastes, and fashions, its politics of style, patterns of consumption, management of free time, and opportunities and obligations, appears as the globalized norm, while the African site becomes characterized by poverty, war, and violence, offering very slim opportunities to children and youth. Of course, the same forms of exclusion

occur within the First World as well. Chin's recent study of consumer habits among black young people in New Haven, Connecticut, acknowledges the profound constraints under which poor and working-class youth struggle to survive in a wealthy society still shaped by class and racial discrimination (Chin 2001).

Without denying these constraints on youth within the West itself or downplaying more global dynamics that shape youth in contemporary Africa, this book situates itself primarily at the local African level. From this site, most contributors analyze the dialectical linkages between the global flow and the local geographies and imaginaries of youth culture. The book also intends to bring African children and youth out of the diaspora, as a spatial reality and as a state of mind, by stressing the role of young people as active participants in broader social, political, and economic fields within Africa itself. Their practices go well beyond imitating, possessing, and refashioning the West. As Argenti's discussion of a Cameroonian dance group by the name of 'Mondial' illustrates, the exogenous becomes a source of power which is sometimes political and highly threatening. Weiss argues that youth's cultural practice is not about 'the "local" expression of a "global" set of forces and institutions, it is, on the contrary, about the connection and simultaneous presence of specific times, places, and persons, with encompassing powers, images and relations'. These partial connections are always multidirectional. We focus on the co-presence of local and global social practices and imaginaries that shape youth but are also shaped by them, in various, often self-invented, spaces and practices of resistance, negation, and opposition and also of collaboration, negotiation, and invention. Here the young appear as agents in and of themselves, in their own diverse and often highly specific cultural production.

Beyond the Postcolonial: Marginalization and Agency

Youth in the West, inhabiting a diverse but important general category from which emanates a potential counter-hegemonic force and a politics 'from below', have moved into the center of mainstream cultural, economic, and political domains, determining the outlook of our consumer culture (Gunter and Furnham, 1998) and influencing political agendas. It may be argued that in Africa, with a few significant exceptions, this is not the situation. The majority of young people in postcolonial Africa, although they are at least as heterogeneous as their Western counterparts, are generally much more marginalized, and often, though not always, they have a much less promising political and economic role to play, locally but also translocally and globally.

In recent years, a number of scholars have debated the marginalization and exclusion of youth from political and social roles in Africa. African youth, while unable to produce and control space more generally, often manage to author identities and make themselves heard and seen in localized urban niches such as the church, the army or war band, and the school. However, a growing number of children and youth in contemporary Africa are excluded from education, healthcare, salaried jobs, and even access to an adult status, given their financial incapacity to construct a house, formally marry, and raise children in turn. The concept of youth becomes more flexible as students are unable to complete their education; in some cases, both father and son are students, as often happens both within the continent and in the African diaspora where the 'eternal student' has become an established social terminus.

Increasingly, whole groups of young people no longer fit in any of the common sites of youth self-realization. More often than not, these youngsters seem literally 'out of place'. Many were involuntarily dislocated, including homeless street children, young diamond diggers and *garimpeiros*, refugee children, war or AIDS orphans, and other 'children of tribulation'

(Reynolds 1990; see also Barrett, 1998a, 1998b; Bazenguissa and MacGaffey, 1995; Bruyère 2001; Hérault and Adesanmi, 1997; Kilbride, Suda, and Njeru, 2000; Marguerat and Poitou, 1994; Noy, Mlenzi, and Simbeye, 2001; Utas et al., n.d.; Wong 1999). Given the inherent ambiguities surrounding such children and youth throughout Africa, responses toward them have been highly ambivalent. Despite the deeply rooted moral and cultural matrix that defines children in terms of intrinsic wealth and as a social good, they are increasingly viewed as troublesome and potentially dangerous. In Central Africa today, children have become a source of evil in the collective social imaginary. In Congo, religious television channels run weekly shows where child-witches are identified during public mass meetings, and the persecution of witch-children in the streets of Congo's towns and villages is becoming common. This unprecedented demonization of children bespeaks a deeply rooted sense of social crisis.

As Hannerz has recently remarked, 'borders are not absolute barriers, (...) they become significant social, cultural, political, economic and legal facts in the way they are crossed' (Hannerz 1999: 326). Producing, maintaining, and crossing the borders between geographic locations as well as between conceptual worlds is a process that generates powerful resources, economically as well as politically and culturally. Young people's ability to mediate, positively or negatively, between the manifold oppositions, ruptures, and contradictions that seem to characterize African worlds today unfolds in a double dynamic: the perceived marginality and liminality of youth places them squarely in the center and generates tremendous power. Many of the essays in *Makers and Breakers* address the nature of that power, interrogating the ambivalent and often contradictory messages sent to us by African children and youth. These chapters analyze youth's capacity to mediate the contradictions in the socio-cultural frontiers which they tend to occupy. These frontiers are also borderlands between past and present, local and global, near and far, 'tradition' and 'modernity'. The power of the young derives from these spaces of confrontation, mutation, and movement in which different cultural itineraries meet and mix. Relegated to non-places and resorting to borderlands, young people, as bearers and producers of these mutant messages, constantly remake their composite identity and lived world and redeploy longstanding local moralities in the intersection with more global forces in new and often surprising ways.

Young people exercise their creative power discursively but also in and through their own bodies, setting in motion a process of self-realization and promotion of social status through consumption and expenditure, appearance, and fashion. This process is a matter of 'self-making', of capturing and 'fixing' the non-steady state of selfhood and identity in different cultural situations (Battaglia 1995). In that respect, the corporeal dimensions of juvenile vocabularies of self-making are important. Dance in particular enables youth to break through the grasp and control of the postcolonial state and its accompanying ideology of colonialist modernity, with its characteristic politics of disciplining and domesticating people, space, time, labor, and relations of production and consumption along the lines of western models. Juvenile bodies appear as subversive sites and frontiers of re-territorialization of official cultural and political grammars. Ultimately, these bodies illustrate how far African youth at the forefront and on the margins of mainstream socio-cultural production have moved beyond the standard frames, possibilities, restrictions, and contradictions of colonial and postcolonial models, leading the way into the new and as yet uncharted territory of the post-postcolony. For more and more young people, both colonial and postcolonial frameworks no longer function as a seamount for their own orientation. These models have even lost their appeal as negative beacons triggering resistance against the old orders. For these young people the existing frames of reference, which are mapping power

relations onto the world in sometimes contested but nevertheless clearly circumscribed and clear-cut ways between the center and the periphery, the former metropole and the postcolony, the haves and the have-nots, the past and the present, have lost all epistemic power. To many young people in contemporary Africa, from Free Town to Kinshasa and Addis-Ababa, the order through which the postcolonial world has existed seems to have become entirely devoid of meaning. What is more, it has become incomprehensible, even unknown, and totally irrelevant to young people's own understanding of the lives they lead. These older modes, frames, and aesthetics of living in and giving order and meaning to local and more global worlds seem to be replaced, to varying degrees, by alternative forms of sociality and being-in-the-world, opening up a space in which few of the former rules apply and which, in consequence, onlookers experience as shockingly violent, frighteningly chaotic, and bewilderingly exotic. At this junction, local youth frontiers in Africa seem to converge in a transnational move beyond the qualities of the postcolonial world. These youth move in worlds governed by rules, norms, ethics, and moralities that seem to have broken quite radically with all kinds of pasts, with the neo-colonial dictates of the mimetic but also with the ambiguities of the multi-layered palimpsestual meanings that the postcolonial context generates. These youth environments may be hybrid in actual make-up and composition, but they deny or have become totally unaware of the conventions of their own hybrid historicity; or they knowingly reject it, in a radical denial of the palimpsestual overdrive with which late postcoloniality confronts them on a daily basis. Their world makes a continuous attempt not at being chaotic and exotic but at achieving self-explanatory clarity and simplification, to serve as an antidote against the incomprehensible and cruel injustices of the world they are condemned to live in. Looked at from the outside, the worlds of these young people are often shockingly self-referential, their horizons astonishingly limited, and their lives self-contained, despite the global *bricolage* that gives form to these youth universes' local contents (Behrend 2002; Biaya 2000; Hansen 2000; Remes 1999). But, lived from within, this limitation is experienced as a necessary attempt at self-protection. One has to reach deep inside and tap into one's own sources of strength in order to be able to create meaning and transparency amid the opacity of a fragmented world.

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