

Joschka Philipps (2013), *Ambivalent Rage: Youth Gangs and Urban Protest in Conakry, Guinea*, Paris: L'Harmattan, ISBN 978-2-343-01577-4, 238 pp.

This monograph<sup>1</sup> is a welcome contribution to the burgeoning literature on the predicament of African youth, trapped between seductive images in the global media of ostentatious consumerism and their inglorious daily struggle to make ends meet in a harsh urban environment. Joschka Philipps steers clear of apocalyptic visions of teeming urban hordes teetering on the brink of anarchy and also avoids taking on the naively optimistic tone of scholars who are tempted to interpret urban protests by youth groupings as the rebirth of progressive social and political engagement. Philipps presents a nuanced picture of youth gangs on the streets of Conakry, where they are attempting to escape life on the margins using an array of strategies, ranging from crime and violence to more creative pursuits such as music, sport and theatrical performances. He displays a sense of empathy, no doubt helped by his own professed affinity to hip-hop culture, but also provides a frank account of the sometimes extreme rage fuelling gangs vis-à-vis not only rival gangs but also the state.

The book opens with an incisive discussion of the main strands in recent debates on African youth, a debate that, as Philipps states, is closely linked to a more general discussion about state–society relations in African nation-states. Throughout his case study, he continues to engage with the concepts and frameworks employed in the recent literature while remaining sensitive to the peculiarities of the case at hand. This volume also provides useful insight into recent political developments in Guinea. Even though youth is a hot topic in African Studies, Guinea has been rather ignored in Africanist literature.

Philipps introduces his readers to different categories of street gangs. The umbrella term “gang” refers to a diversity of organized collectives of young men who are usually inspired by elements of African-American hip-hop as well as “gangsta” culture and refer to themselves as “ghetto youth”. In the subcultural vernacular of Conakry’s youth, a distinction is made between criminal “gangs”; “clans”, focused on conquering and maintaining territorial control; and “staffs”, which are mostly non-violent groups attempting to generate income by organizing cultural events. Gangs offer their members a sense of self-worth, an escape from boredom and the frustration of blocked mobility, an outlet

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for pent-up rage, a measure of social security and a repertoire of expressions that can help them make sense of their world.

In their worldview, politics and politicians are objects of loathing and contempt, but simultaneously of envy and imitation. Politicians, like gang leaders, exercise ruthless power and maintain and exploit extensive networks of patronage and extortion. Gangs are the driving force behind political protests: They have instrumental value for politicians because they are rigidly ordered, remarkably stable and exercise considerable influence in their neighbourhoods. From the gangs' point of view, these protests generate income because politicians pay for the performance, and mass demonstrations offer opportunities for looting. Political loyalty is not an ingredient in these relationships, as gangs switch sides easily and often march for political rivals. However much gang youth despises politicians, access to the networks of the "Big Men" may provide career opportunities. The self-proclaimed ghetto youth therefore defy authority and challenge the status quo, as they yearn to join the world of the rich and powerful.

The author explores why political protests have culminated along Conakry's Route Le Prince, which is known as the "axis", in terms of both frequency and radicalism of protests. Since the violent clashes in 1998 between the mostly Peul inhabitants and the government, many axis neighbourhoods have been left to their own devices. The largely unsupervised neighbourhoods offer a congenial environment for gang life. Unlike gangs in other parts of Conakry, axis youth have developed a political self-understanding due to their first-hand experience with state-society confrontations. The Peul self-image as political victims has easily blended with the vernacular of global hip-hop's connective marginalities. On the one hand, axis gang youth are seeking to escape the rigid hierarchy of Peul family life. The Peul ideal of a disciplined and devout Muslim lifestyle stands in stark contrast with the values of gang life, which features alcohol, drugs, sex and sometimes crime. On the other hand, gang members identify with Peul feelings of victimization. The Peul are the largest ethnic group in Guinea but feel excluded from political power.

On the issue of politicized ethnicity, the discussion becomes a bit murky. Philipps stresses that large numbers of gang youth are dissociated from their ethnic group and refuse to identify themselves as bearers of an ethnic identity. Yet, the sense of Peul victimization and marginalization is a powerful ingredient of their rage. Of course, the book's title, *Ambivalent Rage*, prepares the reader for paradoxes and contradictions, but a deeper analysis of the meaning of ethnic identity in gang life would have been useful.

One of the strong points of the book is Philipps' analysis of the agency of youth in the context of specific spatial-historical conditions. He rejects sweeping macro-economic frameworks, such as youth-bulge theories or explanations in terms of marginalization and impoverishment, as he seeks to explain why political protests occur disproportionately often in certain parts of town and much less often in other neighbourhoods that are equally poor and neglected.

"Ambivalence" remains the keyword in this study. Youth gangs experience a sense of power (however fleeting) and have the potential to destabilize the government. However, the advent of a democratically elected government has not brought an end to their involvement in political violence. Philipps concludes that the main target of their rage remains the state in general, and he predicts that gang youth will continue to challenge any regime, whether illegitimate or democratically elected, unless there is a drastic improvement in their living conditions and prospects.

Some questions remain. It is surprising to learn about the longevity of many of the street gangs. Do gangs outlive the careers of their leaders? How are gangs reproduced? And what does a typical gang career look like? How are new members recruited, how long does one remain attached to gang life, are there exit options, and at what point does one cease to be a "youth"? What is life like after a gang career? Furthermore, with the book's focus on street gangs, it is almost inevitable that the role of girls and young women is largely limited to objects of desire and competition.

The book is an adaptation of the author's M.A. thesis, which deservedly won the 2012 Junior Researcher Award presented by the German Association for African Studies (VAD). It is elegantly written, clearly structured and lucidly argued. It should serve as an inspiration for M.A. students, Ph.D. students and other scholars struggling to make sense of African realities that somehow never seem to fit neatly into the categories of elaborate theoretical constructs.

■ Ineke van Kessel