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Review of Trudell B., King K., McGrath S. Nugent P. : Africa's Young Majority

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BARBARA TRUDELL, KENNETH KING, SIMON McGRATH and PAUL NUGENT (eds),
Africa's Young Majority. Edinburgh: Centre of African Studies, University of
Edinburgh, 2002, 342 pp., £19.50, ISBN 0 9527917 7 3 (paperback).

This volume is a collection of fourteen papers, produced by academics and NGO practitioners working with young people, for a conference held at the Centre of African Studies in Edinburgh. The contributors address a wide range of issues, ranging from street children and child soldiers to sports and popular culture. The quality of the chapters is very uneven: some seem to be rough drafts, badly in need of editing; others offer little more than a recycling of existing literature, such as the chapter on child soldiers in Northern Uganda. Of most interest, of course, are the authors who present original research, as, for example, Rémy Bazenguissa-Ganga on the religious mobilisation of young Congolese militiamen, David Maxwell on born-again Christianity in Zimbabwe, Safiyya Aliyah Abdullah on popular youth culture in Kano and Bhekizwe Peterson on youth culture in Soweto.

In the foreword, the Centre's director, Kenneth King, states that this volume aspires to present young people not as objects of policy or of research, but rather 'seeks to capture the vibrancy of young people as actors and agents in so many spheres of social, cultural and political life' (p. iii). With the exception of the three chapters on sports and on popular culture, this promise unfortunately is not kept. Indeed, in quite a few of the chapters, the reader searches in vain for the perspective of the young people concerned. What is the worldview of young people faced with blocked futures and now exploring—by choice or by force—alternative careers in crime, war, on the streets, in charismatic churches or in the countercultures of kwaito, rap and hiphop? How do they make sense of their world, how do they interpret their predicament and what are their aspirations?

In the introduction, Barbara Trudell affirms that 'certainly for the marginalized, education is seen as a crucial means of escape from the vicious circle of ignorance and the inability to control one's own destiny' (p. 7). Does this conventional wisdom still hold true in countries where secondary school leavers are swelling the ranks of the unemployed, or worse, where the state and the formal economy have all but ceased to exist, as in Zaire? In Peterson's view, kwaito does not celebrate the virtues of education, but rather the seductions of consumer society and the 'triumph of the corporeal body' over traditional Christian moral values (p. 326).

Thokozani Xaba gets off to an interesting start in his paper on the 'young lions' of the anti-apartheid struggle who in the course of the 1990s drifted into criminal careers. He aptly examines the confrontation between 'struggle masculinity' and 'post-struggle masculinity' during South Africa's transition period. But again, the reader is unable to picture the young men concerned. We need to get a long-term view of their trajectory from struggle heroes to enemies of the community. What role did these youngsters play in the liberation struggle? Were they amongst the articulate student and community leaders, or did they belong to the 'lumpen-element' that provided many of the street fighters for the battles against the police and against conservative elements in the townships? From the newspaper reports, it is clear that some of these former liberation fighters subsequently committed unspeakable horrors against the communities they sought to liberate; but what made them do so? Or has the dividing line between resistance and criminality always been more blurred than we would like to imagine?

Bazenguissa-Ganga provides a fascinating glimpse of young men being mobilised in rival Brazzaville militias by respectively a prophet and a healer.

But the reader is left wondering: what does it all mean? David Everatt presents an interesting overview of youth and youth policies in the 1990s in South Africa and rightly warns against the trap of treating 'youth' as a homogenous category. Catherine Baylies surveys the dilemmas facing young people in the era of AIDS, reading some hopeful signs that young people at risk can and do change their patterns of sexual behaviour. But readers hoping to catch a glimpse of the 'vibrancy of young people as actors and agents' only find solace in Peter Alegi's chapter on football clubs in Soweto in the 1930s-1950s, Abdullah's explorations of youth and popular culture in Kano, and Peterson's fascinating account in 'Yizo-Yizo: reading the swagger in Soweto youth culture'. Unlike Trudell's assertion in the introduction (p. 3), Yizo-Yizo is not an 'art form' that challenges the existing social order. As Peterson clearly explains, it is a televised drama series produced by the public broadcaster, the South African Broadcasting Corporation, and the National Department of Education (p. 328).

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ROGER BOTTE, JEAN BOUTRAIS and JEAN SCHMITZ (eds), *Figures peules*. Paris: Karthala, 1999, 539 pp., €29.00, ISBN 2 86537 983 3 (paperback).

As a field of study, the Fulbe have a long history, dating back to the time European travellers identified Fulfulde-speaking groups throughout West Africa as belonging to a single pastoral people, intrinsically different from the populations among whom they lived in varying degrees of dependency or dominance. Colonial administrators and anthropologists subsequently engaged in constituting and reinforcing the Fulbe as a separate ethnic group, initially drawing on biological arguments, and later, after racial theories were discredited, emphasising cultural specificity. Especially since the 1990s, researchers studying Fulbe have felt increasingly uncomfortable with the premises that facilitated the emergence and persistence of their subject. Somewhat paradoxically, this provoked an upsurge of publications, which has succeeded in positioning Fulbe studies prominently in the broader debates on ethnicity in Africa. *Figures peules* is another such collaborative effort that converts doubt and reflection about the study field's right to exist into an indisputable strength.

Within the scope of this review it is impossible to do justice to each of the twenty well-wrought chapters that cover a wide range of disciplines and geographic areas. Only a few issues can be dealt with. First, the different contributions defy any notion of a unified Fulbe identity. Boëtsch and Ferrié set the scene, by situating the invention of a Fulbe category—assumed as intermediate in the hierarchy of peoples—in the colonisers' effort to strengthen the distance between themselves and 'black' populations while simultaneously creating some proximity. Next, Boesen makes a strong case against an essentialist interpretation of *pulaaku* (a long-standing cultural marker, often interpreted as codified ideal Fulbe behaviour), by analysing how it is realised and experienced in practice. Three more authors deal with the construction and performance of identity: Nassourou evokes how, in Cameroon, the *hiirde* institution—framework for the expression of *pulaaku*—used to promote social and ethic values, and faded after having been co-opted by national politics; Baumgardt deals with the way Fulbe tales relate to identity construction in a