1

Conceptual and Theoretical Discourse

Youths and Contentious Collective Action

In Africa, young people constitute the majority of the population and are at the centre of societal interactions and transformations. Yet, children and youths are often placed at the margins of the public sphere and major political, socio-economic and cultural processes. According to Ikelegbe (2006), 'youth ordinarily is a category of early adulthood, emerging in activity and involvement in society but somewhat limited by societal values and some levels of dependency and perhaps agency'.

As a demographic and social category, the youth is characterised by considerable tensions and conflicts generated by the process of social and physical maturation and in the adjustment to societal realities. Briefly put, youths are engaged in a struggle for survival, identity and inclusion, a struggle that shapes how they 'as a social group respond to or more broadly relate to state and society in terms of engagement or disengagement, incorporation or alienation, rapprochement or resistance, integration or deviance' (Ikelegbe 2006).

Youths are 'makers of society as they contribute to the structures, norms, rituals and directions of society.... They make themselves, through inventive forms of self-realisation and an ingenious politics of identity' (DeBoeck 1999a), 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 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. Youths are therefore a tension-filled, highly unstable category whose management is of crucial importance for societal stability and development as it is a stage of restlessness, anxiety and chaos for the youth and society. It is, as 'breakers of societal norms',

that youths in Africa are commonly perceived as characterised by suicide and drug use, and most importantly, by involvement in violence, insurgencies and civil wars. Why this common perception or, as expressed by Ikelegbe (2006), 'what translates youth frustration and despair into mass action, insurgency and confrontations?'. The dominant perspective in the literature sees that the youths as 'Breakers' have been rooted in a negative youth culture.

For Kaplan (1994), negative youth culture in Africa is socio-environmental in source: urban congestions, polygamy, disease, environmental stress and superficial religion which all lead to a creation of a new barbarism of crime and violence. Richards (1996) sees negative youth culture as rooted in the collapse of the educational and social service systems, unemployment and physical hardships. The emergence of violence and armed rebellion is thus a response of frustrated youths against a failing or collapsed state and state institutions and services. Abdallah, on the other hand, sees negative youth culture as a subaltern phenomenon, 'a lumpen class of half-educated, unemployed and unemployable, informal or underground economy-based marginal youths prone to indiscipline, crime and violence' (Ikelegbe 2006). The lumpen youths and their negative culture, it is claimed, would transform into opposition and challenge, and later the support base for violent struggles. These three researchers therefore ascribe the youth involvement in violence and crime to a disposing culture characterised by nihilism, populism, spontaneity, violence, resentments of the state and deviance from societal norms.

As pointed out by Olawale (2003) and reiterated by Ikelegbe (2006), the negative youth culture argument has several weaknesses. The first is that it generalises an all-inclusive and monolithic negative youth culture, and presents it as tending in one direction in terms of manifestations and response. The second is that negative youth culture is not specific to Africa but general to youths all over the world, with such negative youth culture not having generated a worldwide cauldron of armed rebellion. Olawale (2003) provides a contrary explanation for youth violence. He locates it, not in a 'negative youth culture' but in 'state weakness and collapse'. For him, 'the weak and failing public authorities, neo-patrimonialism, corruption, repression, abuse and other manifestations of state decay generate armed insurgencies and civil wars which pervert youth culture'.

In other words, emphasis should rather be placed on the inability of institutions of African state and society to mediate the transition process from youth to adulthood in Africa. It is such inability that motivates African youths to seek or create alternative social safety networks in the form of counter-culture groups, or makes youth culture susceptible to perversion by armed insurgencies and civil wars generated by perverse manifestations of state decay.

The perversion of youth culture is sped up by the fact that institutions such as rites of passage and other rituals of initiation or age-grade associations, which normally channeled forces of rebellion emanating from children and youth, and structurally embedded in social dynamics which strengthened the social equilibrium,

are rapidly eroding. With traditional kin-based, ethnic and multigenerational associations that manage the transformations from boyhood to manhood and from girlhood to womanhood having lost their taken-for-granted status and social significance, youths seek new avenues for socialisation in form of gangs and their associated multiple subcultures expressed in terms of dress, music and specific modes of violence.

These subcultures, because they are different from that prescribed by society are demonised by society, with youths 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 societal fantasies of what youths should be are quickly perceived as demonic, discontented and disorderly, and are often feared and punished, giving rise to a huge group of alienated youths who do not have trust in their elders, leaders and institutions.

The youth in Africa is thus described in popular and academic literature as 'a social category in crisis, excluded, marginalised, threatened, victimised, abused and consequently angry, bitter, frustrated, desperate and violent. The popular perception is that it is such alienated youths that drift into violence as they respond to alienation by 'becoming uncontrollably aggressive and violent …establishing societies, frightening the middle classes and reinforcing, if not justifying, dictatorships' (El-Kenz 1996).

Social Movements: Instruments of Contentious Collective Action

When youth action is seen as a form of 'contentious politics', popular perception of the youths and youth revolt, as 'ill-informed, irrelevant, unstructured and largely episodic expressions of violence, become erroneous. Alienated from society, youths, along with other marginal or subalterns, mostly embark on what Tarrow has termed 'Contentious Politics' or Contentious Collective Action – defined as 'collective action embarked upon by people who lack regular access to institutions, who act in the name of new or unacceptable claims and who behave in ways that fundamentally challenge others or authorities' (Tarrow 1999). In other words, contentious collective actions are attempts to redress allegations and perceptions of discrimination, exclusion, oppression, injustice, domination and exploitation which all arise from denials and violations of human rights. The bottom line of contentious collective action is the demand for rights.

For contentious politics to be mounted, coordinated and sustained, it needs the backing of 'a dense social network, galvanised by culturally resonant and action oriented symbols. In other words, it requires a social movement, 'those sequences of contentious politics that are based on underlying social networks and resonant collective action frames, and which develop the capacity to maintain sustained challenges against powerful opponents' (Tarrow 1999:2) for its sustenance.

Social movements are important to the sustenance of contentious politics because:

a) Their ideological principles are essentially a diverse range of beliefs, ideas and values that are dominantly radical in terms of relations to existing concepts.

b) Usually, in terms of slections of practices, behaviours and culture, the ideology of new social movements challenges dominant ideas.

c) They pursue goals that often relate to reforms and change (Doyle and Mceachern 2001).

d) The agitation and claims they push often emanate from grievances and social discontent against dominant practices, behaviour and conduct in the political economy such as exclusion, marginality and inequity.

e) They are often populist, embracing a non-formal, non-institutional, grassroots politics or mass politics. They often comprise the popular forces of youth and women groups, poor students, artisans, etc.

f) Their methodology of pressing claims is mass mobilisation and collective direct actions. This involves protests, rallies and demonstrations. Sometimes, their methods might include militant resistance which may include blockades and disruptions.

g) They usually construct a platform for action and change. They create and work through an array of local, national and international linkages, networks and alliances between numerous groupings and organisations. Their actions involve co-operation, collaboration, complementarity and mutual support between individuals, groups and organisations in the pursuance of agenda and claims.

Briefly put, social movements, '… collective challenges mounted by relatively marginal groups against powerful elites and dominant ideologies', are the main expression of subaltern/marginal opposition to dominant power structure in society. Social movements are the dominant form of expression of contentious political action because 'it is the main and often the only recourse that ordinary people possess against better equipped opponents or powerful states' (Medearis 2005).

From Contention to Violence

The strategy or posture adopted by a social movement at any point in time is a function of the 'Political Opportunities' and 'Constraints' that encourage or constraint participation in contention. Political opportunities refer to 'consistent … dimensions of the political struggle that encourage people to engage in contentious politics'. Political constraints on the other hand, refer to 'factors – like

repression – that discourages contention'. The key source of political opportunity or constraint lies in state action. The state is more than a target of movements; it is the means by which a movement defines its identity and strategy (Olarinmoye:2007) because of 'the great concentration of power in nation-states and the propensity to deploy them as and when due' (Ukeje 2001:353). Thus, it is the character of the state as 'instigator of violence', that structures the strategies deployed by movements involved in contentious politics.

For example, in Africa, the state is a strong one in terms of an over-developed capacity for violence and enforcement of its will and policies. At the same time, it has an under-developed capacity to meet the political, social and economic needs of the majority of its people. Its marginalised peoples are thus pushed to engage in contentious political action through social movements that demand for fundamental changes that threaten state elites.

The response is repression as the state in Africa is prepared to have recourse to repressive violence, not because it has much chance of succeeding, but because its own inherent weaknesses prevent recourse to less violent alternatives (Mason & Dale 1989)

While repression can silence or curtail group action, it has the consequence of radicalising movement action, as:

> violence under this condition becomes the easiest of all options available for use by a disadvantaged group because it does not have a high threshold of social transaction costs in terms of preparation and is also easier for isolated, illiterate and local groups to imitate.

In other words, in Africa where the daily lives of the majority of people is characterised by 'powerlessness' (Aina 1996), repression by the state, of movements that demand for changes that will end powerlessness leads to the contentious politics taking a violent turn as state repression is vigorously resisted by the people, leading to civil wars, anarchy and collapse of states.

Youths are principal actors in the transition from contentious politics to violence because they are most affected by situation of powerlessness, which state oppression aggravates. For youths, violence becomes a bargaining weapon for negotiating, legitimising or violating (oppressive) public order. Hence, youth revolt as witnessed in Niger-delta and other parts of Africa are not 'ill-informed, irrelevant, unstructured and largely episodic expressions of violence' (Momoh 1996**)** but facets of contentious politics aimed at ending powerlessness, especially in the face of state oppression and callous indifference.