

Burton, Andrew; Charton-Bigot, Hélène (Hrsg.): *Generations Past. Youth in East African History*. Athens: Ohio University Press 2010. ISBN: 978-0-8214-1924-3; 301 S.

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The issue of youth is one of the most urgent challenges in Africa. Given the demographic dominance of young people on the African continent, the issue of youth intersects with questions of economic crises and political marginalization, with the search for more social influence in the public sphere and with new forms of cultural expressions. Recent research has stressed the ambivalent social, cultural and political position of young people in Africa, considering them „makers“ and „breakers“, as well as „vanguards“ and „vandals“.¹ Few researchers, however, have considered youth in Africa in a historical perspective. This volume on „Generations Past“ edited by two historians, Andrew Burton and Hélène Charton-Bigot, wants to contribute to this research gap by focusing on youth in East African history. Burton and Charton-Bigot remind us that the predominance of young people has been characteristic of African societies at least since the late 1940s. Yet, simple statistical data do not tell us why and how „the young matter“ (p. 2).

The essays in this volume cover a wide range of East African countries – mainly in the geographical area of today’s Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda – and explore the meaning of youth and generation from the mid-18th to the 20th century (even though only one paper by Richard Reid is fully dedicated to the 18th and 19th century). It is a volume of twelve well-researched and thought-provoking case-studies which provide insights into the multifaceted and changing character of youth in Africa. The essays consider the thematic areas of (1) youth, war and conflict; (2) the specific experience of different generations; (3) shifting conceptions of youth and generation; (4) the political role of youth; and (5) youth in relation to sexuality and gender. A recurrent issue is the question of how youth intersects with power and authority – either in precolonial, colonial or

postcolonial contexts, and both on a more private, family level and on the level of state power.

The main issue discussed from different perspectives is the tension between the „young“ and the „elders“, often connected to a struggle over political change. Youth, as James J. Giblin argues, should be considered as actors in their own right. Reid demonstrates how the young in Buganda and the Ethiopian highlands in the 18th and 19th century sought to challenge the state and utilized violence to bring about change. Dave Eaton shows how „young men have bitterly contested the authority of their elders for centuries“ (p. 48) in Northeastern Uganda and Northwestern Kenya. Charton-Bigot describes in her paper how Kenyan students defied the colonial social order after the Second World War. And James Brennan, examining the TANU Youth League in Dar es Salaam, indicates how young men were prone to seize political opportunities in the 1940s and „formed an increasingly powerful political force in their own right“ (p. 196).

„Youth“ has often been perceived as a „constant thread“ (Reid, p. 28), as troublesome, as „idle and belligerent“ (Waller, p. 136). Tanganyika Sunday News, as Andrew Burton mentions, called „workless youth“ a „problem of our future“ in the late 1950s (p. 108). Richard Waller underlines that the idea of a delinquent and disruptive youth was first applied by colonial authorities in the Kenyan countryside during the interwar period in order to describe Maasai warriors in the bush. How much such an image persisted becomes obvious when reading Justin Willis’ essay on the story of an alcohol advertising ban in 2005 in Kenya, „the latest round in a long cultural argument over age and authority“ (p. 281), as Willis writes, and an expression of the „wide anxiety about youth“ (p. 280), their „unruliness“ and their „disobedience“ (p. 283).

The authors, however, do not construct a simple image of „young“ versus „old“, but invite the reader to understand the relations between young and elders „in more subtle

¹ Filip De Boeck / Alcinda Honwana (eds.), *Makers and Breakers. Children and Youth in Postcolonial Africa*, Oxford 2005; John Abbink / Ineke van Kessel (eds.), *Vanguards or Vandals. Youth, Politics and Conflict in Africa*, Leiden 2005.

and balanced terms“ (Giblin, p. 81). „There are powers in the youth and also in the old“, quotes Eaton (p. 62) a cattle raider from the area of the Kenya-Uganda border. Young people were victims and practitioners of violence, describes Reid. In colonial Tanganyika, as James Giblin analyses, youth challenged their elders by entering mission communities, longing for greater autonomy, but also remained within networks of mutual obligation and responsibility to kin. The image of youth was not as clear-cut. Youth labor camps in revolutionary Zanzibar were intended to construct „happy images of youth building the nation“ (Burgess, p. 227), creating „a new type of citizen“ (p. 224). Yet, Thomas Burgess depicts that many young were simply unwilling to conduct routine work in the camps and camp discipline was sometimes „chaotic“.

For a German reader it might be surprising to read a volume on „Generations Past“, in which Karl Mannheim’s concept of generation is not mentioned once.² Charton-Bigot and Burton write about „youth cohorts“, Waller about „age-sets“. Shane Doyle sees marriage as „the most significant marker of the end of youth“ (p. 237). It would have been desirable to read a bit more on the issue of how to conceptualize youth and generation and how to embed the different case studies on East African history within broader current debates on youth and generation in other regions of Africa and the world. Avoiding getting back to Mannheim, however, has also something intriguing. As Brennan points out, the concept of „youth“ understood as both category and group during the 20th century was rapidly changing (p. 196). There was neither one generation nor one youth at any given time in East African history. Youth and generation have been „in flux“ (p. 186). The colonial context „undermined the categorical stability of generation“ even further, as Charton-Bigot and Burton notice (p. 9), while changing gender conceptions intersected with concepts and experience of youth and generation, as Doyle as well as Joyce Nyairo and Eunice Kamaara demonstrate. Moreover, Carole Summers recognizes that she mentioned „few actual youth“ in her essay, but wrote much more about shifting „metaphors, ideas, and concepts of social order“ (p. 189). „Youth“

can be described as a „social shifter“³, an indexical term, such as „here“ and „there“, which points to the relational context in which young people define themselves and are defined. Also, „youth“ can be a „claim-making concept“, utilized by young and elders to bring about social change, as I would add. The authors in this volume provide many rich examples for such a dynamic idea of youth and generation.

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² Karl Mannheim, *Das Problem der Generation*, in: *Wissenssoziologie. Auswahl aus dem Werk*, introduced and edited by Kurt H. Wolff, Neuwied / Berlin 1964 [1928], S. 509-565.

³ Deborah Durham, *Youth and the Social Imagination in Africa*, in: *Anthropological Quarterly* 73 (2000) 3, S. 113-120.