



# Youth and Modernity in Africa

*Seminar and Roundtable*

10-12 October 2007

CEAS/CEA

The purpose of this event is to unsettle the apparently obvious relationship between youth and modernity in Sub-Saharan Africa. The link between generation and change will be problematized and contested, refusing linear periodizations implicit in the notion of modernity, and underlining instead the ambiguous and troubled relationship between youth and social and cultural change in contemporary Africa. The challenge we take up is therefore that of proposing new theoretical frames to reassess the role of youth in contemporary Africa, getting rid of the pitfalls of modernity or modernization theory but without overlooking concrete and dramatic processes of change. Actually, if it is indeed problematic to understand contemporary youth in Africa in terms of 'modernity', we cannot overlook neither that the African present has much to do with the impact and reaction to expansive markets, mass media and commoditization, and with the colonial and postcolonial Euro-American expansion; nor can we ignore the powerful hold that the *idea* of modernity has in many popular fields of discourse, both in local contexts, state policies and international institutions. Notions of being and becoming modern, aspirations to become modern, are a palpable and potent ideology in many if not most areas of Africa.

Dealing with the relics of post-independence modernisation agendas and struggling with the contradictions of the ecumenical ideology of globalization, young people have appropriated notions of development, modernity and progress, reworking them and at the same time reassessing their future through them, trying to make sense of their present and dire condition. If we consider the question of youth in Africa, in fact, we rapidly realise that the controversial role of youth in politics, conflicts and rebellious movements is one of the major challenges in the continent today. The issue is that of the problematic insertion of large numbers of young people in the socio-economic and political order of post-independence Africa. African youth, while forming a numerical majority, largely feel excluded from power, are socio-economically marginalized and thwarted in their ambitions. Despite these constraints and structural violence, young people throughout the continent have shown a stunning capacity of local agency, creating, manipulating and inventing new identities and strategies, transforming urban and rural contexts in surprising and unexpected directions. In war zones, migratory paths, villages and shanty towns, young people are strong emerging actors and a consistent theoretical concern comes out, in order to show how they are active agents in the construction and manipulation of the forms of sociability of contemporary Africa.

# Programme

## *Seminar*

**Eric Gable**  
**(University of Mary Washington, USA)**

**October, 10**  
**Auditorium B104**  
**ISCTE**

10.30-13.00 *Youth and Social and Cultural Theory*

We explore the foundational question for any ethnographic study of youth: Is youth a universally significant category? Is it helpful to think of young people in a variety of societies as similarly situated as social actors and similarly imagined—that is, as culturally analogous? To think about such questions requires that we not only make comparisons among societies in Africa but also between African societies and societies elsewhere, while also accounting for historical transformations in single societies. In doing these comparisons we review, from the perspective of a concrete problem, basic issues in anthropological theories of the social and the cultural.

15.00-17.30 *Youth and responsibility*

We interrogate a set of common facts about youth as social actors—their roles as agents of change—in order to think about youth as moral agents. Youth are often at the vanguard of social revolutions, local and national, as well as transnational. Youth also are agents of cultural transformations—they are involved in aesthetic appropriations from the most prosaic to the most profound. Yet their status (both in common theories about them and in the way they are perceived locally) as moral agents is often as not ambiguous, even paradoxical. This seminar allows us to ask: how are youth in Africa responsible and moral, or alternatively, irresponsible and immoral, both from the perspectives of social and cultural theories laid out in the first seminar, and from the perspective of particularly situated ethnographic subjects.

**Henrik Vigh**

**(RCT, Rehabilitation and Research Centre for Torture Victims, Denmark)**

**October, 11**  
**Auditorium B104**  
**ISCTE**

10.30-13.00 *Youth as Being and Becoming*

This session will focus on some of the different ways youth is lived and imagined. We will look at the dominant ways we address issues of youth within the social sciences and

illuminate how our understanding of 'youth' as a socio-generational category varies in relation to gender, wealth and geography. The session will show the different traditions within youth studies. By situating the concept in relation to the lives and imaginaries of urban youth in West Africa; it will focus on how 'youth' is understood by young men in Guinea Bissau and strike a dialogue between their understanding of 'being young', and the current conception of the possibilities and predicaments of youth as portrayed in the North. Finally, we will advocate an alternative view on youth as both 'being and becoming' and seek to find a way forward which is not divided between the study of 'youth' as social position and as a social process - as either 'youth culture' or 'life stage'.

15.00-17.30 *Social Death and Violent Life Chances*

In this session we will turn our attention toward youth politics and the mobilization of urban youth in West Africa. We will focus on the way youth struggle to gain social being and attain adulthood in a terrain of poverty and conflict and illuminate how urban youth navigate the social ties and options that arise in situations of factional conflict and prolonged political disorder. Building on the Guinean notion of *dubriagem* the concept of social navigation will be discussed as an analytical optic capable of providing insight into the interplay between objective structures and subjective agency thereby allowing us to make sense of the tactical ways in which youth struggle to expand the horizons of possibility and allowing us to see how conflict engagement becomes a question of balancing social death with violent life chances.

*Roundtable*

October, 12

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First Session  
10.00h  
Auditorium B104  
ISCTE

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**Clara Carvalho**

**(ISCTE/CEA)**

*Introduction*

**Eric Gable**

**(University of Mary Washington, USA)**

*Worldliness in Out of the Way Places*

Youth in the kinds of societies Clifford Geertz called “out of the way places” are often as not cosmopolitan at least in their aspirations—in their fashions, their fantasies, their desires. This paper looks at such youthful aspirations in two geographically and culturally societies—briefly at Lauje of Indonesia, and more extensively at Manjaco of Guinea-Bissau—to reflect on the current scholarly concern with cosmopolitans and cosmopolitanism. One way that we have treated these attempts at worldliness has been to argue that these reflect claims for equal rights of membership in a unequal global society. A claim to “equal rights” as they have been defined in the West is one kind of moral mutuality entailed in cosmopolitan aspirations. Yet, an aspiration to worldliness also entails their assertion that we are, or at least should be, like them. It is the central theme of this paper that it in the obverse that the cultural particularity of the local reveals itself. Manjaco and Lauje might look like us and at times look and talk alike in this shared aspiration. But they talk very differently about what they expect of us in a world we mutually make. This is what the fieldwork encounter teaches us. It is in the particularity of such encounters that an anthropology of the out of the way can illustrate the cultural variety of cosmopolitanisms and their differing discourses of moral mutuality.

**Lorenzo Bordonaro**

**(CEAS, Lisbon)**

*Beyond victimization: youth and the appropriation of 'development' in the Bijagó Islands  
(Guinea Bissau)*

Guinea Bissau has recently undergone a period of economic duress and political instability. Young people throughout the country are particularly affected by this situation, socially and economically marginalized, and politically underrepresented: even educated youths are confronted with a lack of opportunities, blocked social mobility, and despair about the future. Without overlooking these social and economic constraints, however, my goal in this paper is to overcome the sense of victimization and passivity prevailing in much sociological work on youth in African countries, exploring the strategies young people are putting in place to cope with their difficult situation. I will do so through the analysis of the 'will to be modern' of a group of young boys living in Bubaque, in the Bijagó Islands. Their discourse of modernity will be considered as a cultural strategy to overcome social and political marginality: appropriating the narrative of development and taking advantage of the institutions of modernity, young people strive to find their way among (and a way out from) the predicaments of contemporary Guinea Bissau. In their case, the language of development and modernisation, though essentially marginalizing and discriminating, opens up discursive spaces of freedom and autonomy, giving agents an acknowledged 'voice' and becoming a critical locution inside local dynamics: the discourse of modernity turns into a weapon of social demands against traditional and postcolonial authorities, an idiom to express aspirations, needs, and rights.

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**Second Session  
14.30h  
Auditorium B104  
ISCTE**

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**Henrik Vigh**

**(RCT, Rehabilitation and Research Centre for Torture Victims, Denmark)**

*Crisis and Chronocity: reflections on everyday conflict and decline*

"The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that 'the state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule" (W. Benjamin).

For most of us crisis is an experience of temporary abnormality primarily related to disease, trauma or bereavement. Yet for a great many people around the world: the chronically ill, the structurally violated, socially marginalised and poor, the world is not

characterised by peace, prosperity and order but by the ever-present possibility of conflict, poverty and disorder. 800 million people alone live under conditions of hunger, and counting the many that live in states of repression, violation and fear, Walter Benjamin's above quote becomes meaningful as an empirical fact. In other words, though the quote may seem excessive seen from the safety and prosperity of our world of privileged plenty, we need not move far, neither temporally nor spatially, before we become aware that social, political and existential crises play a very real role as a constant in the lives of many people around the world.

**Ramon Sarró**

**(ICS, Lisbon)**

*Youth, Memory and Heritage*

Africa is becoming younger and younger. In some countries, up to 75% of the population is less than 30 years old. In a continent where cultural transmission has been heavily dependant on notions of seniority and on long processes of knowledge acquisition, how does the youthful condition of today's Africa interplay with cultural memory, with knowledge of the past and with the building (or the reclaiming) of cultural heritages? Is Africa "forgetting" something? Is "remembering" a necessary element for the construction of a better future? In my presentation, I want to discuss these issues and to share some ethnographic examples with you.

**Cristina Udelsmann Rodrigues**

**(CEA, Lisbon)**

*Youth in Angola: keeping the pace towards modernity*

Angolan youth experiences of life are characterised both by conflict and by hope. This applies to those who were born and grew up in rural areas – the most affected by war – as well as to urban youth, with more access to “modernity” but whose future is equally under permanent threat. These situations affect the way young people face the future, actually limiting their possibility to take decisions about their lives. Peace has brought about new opportunities but also many challenges, making evident the difference between those who had more chances during their youth and those who had less. Based on qualitative data collected in Angola, this paper analyses the challenges young people are facing nowadays in Angola, their expectations and aspirations towards the future, and how the idea of modernity is shaping them.

# Participants

**Eric Gable** is associate professor at the University of Mary Washington. He received his Ph.D. in anthropology from the University of Virginia and his B.A. in anthropology from the University of California, San Diego. He has done fieldwork among Laujé of Sulawesi, Indonesia, Manjaco of Guinea-Bissau (and in Lisbon), and Americans working in and visiting Colonial Williamsburg, one of the biggest open air history museums in the world. His central research concern was how people experience inequality and wrestle with its implications, as he looked at, for example, the beliefs and practices associated with the Manjaco local king and chiefs as those institutions were dramatically affected by colonialism and a violent revolutionary struggle for independence. He explored similar issues among Laujé—ethnically and religiously marginalized citizens in a (typically) peripheral region of one of Indonesia's peripheral islands—citizens who continued to pay allegiance to a king whose kingdom had long since dissolved into the nation-state and citizens who continued to practice certain forms of religious inspired curing that put them at odds with Muslim religious orthodoxies and the modernizing imperatives of the Indonesian state. He studied (with Richard Handler) Colonial Williamsburg's museum administrators and guides who use a "community of memory," recreated out of clapboard and brick, to talk about the roots of racial and class inequalities in a society supposedly founded upon the ideals of a universal egalitarianism (see *The New History in an Old Museum: Creating the Past at Colonial Williamsburg, 1997*, Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press). At present he is writing a book (*Kinds of Cosmopolitans, or Anthropology and Egalitarianism*) that draws on these varied fieldwork experiences to meditate on the problems of constructing theories and vernaculars of cultural difference in the era of globalization.

**Lorenzo I. Bordonaro** (PhD, ISCTE, Lisbon), is associate researcher at the Centro de Estudos de Antropologia Social (CEAS) in Lisbon. He has been conducting research in the Archipelago of the Bijagós since 1993, initially investigating music and public performance as key elements in the social construction of masculinity. Since 2001 he worked on youth urban culture in Bubaque (always in the Archipelago of the Bijagós), focussing on the construction of local modernity, its distinctive identity and consumption practices, and its imaginative features. He is presently working on the articulation between youth and migration culture in Cape Verde.

**Ramon Sarró** read Philosophy in Spain ('Licenciatura', Autonomous University of Barcelona, 1988) and Social Anthropology in the UK (PhD, University College London, 1998). In 2000-2002 he held the Ioma Evans-Pritchard Junior Research Fellowship at St Anne's College, Oxford, before moving to Portugal where he is now a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Social Sciences, University of Lisbon. Since 1992 he has been conducting research on the interface between material culture, religion and politics among Baga-speaking people of Guinea (West Africa), mainly on an iconoclastic movement that took place in 1956 and its legacies and memories today. His book *\_Surviving Iconoclasm: The Politics of Religious Change on the Upper Guinea Coast\_* will soon be published by the International African Institute. He has co-edited, with David Berliner, the volume *\_Learning Religion: Anthropological Approaches\_* (Berghahn Books, Oxford, 2007) and with Antónia Lima *\_Terrenos Metropolitanos: Ensaio de Produção Etnográfica\_* (Imprensa de Ciências Sociais, Lisbon, 2006).

**Henrik Vigh** is a Senior Researcher at the Research Centre for Torture Victims and a Lecturer at the University of Copenhagen. He holds a Ph.D. from the University of Copenhagen. He has

researched the mobilisation of youth into Protestant paramilitary networks in Belfast, Northern Ireland, as well as the mobilisation, demobilisation and remobilisation of young people in Bissau, Guinea-Bissau. He is the author of 'Navigating Terrains of War' and is currently researching undocumented West African migrants in Europe focussing on the networks that they depend on, develop and are caught up in.

**Clara Carvalho** is Professor at the Department of Anthropology of the ISCTE, Lisbon, invited Professor at the Université de Lille (2002-2003) and the Brown University (2004), Chair of the Center of African Studies (CEA-ISCTE), member of the European Association of Social Anthropologists and the Research Center on Social Anthropology (CEAS-ISCTE). She has conducted research about the recreation of tradition in Guinea-Bissau from 1992 till 1997 (not continuous) ("A Revitalização do Poder Tradicional e os Regulados Manjaco da Guiné-Bissau, *Etnográfica*, Lisbon, 2000; "Reflexions sur les histoires d'origine à Pecixe (Cacheu, Guinée-Bissau)", *Migrations Anciennes sur les Hautes Côtes de Guinée*, Gérald Gaillard & Marie-Paule Ferry ed., Paris, L'Harmattan, 2000; Ritos de Poder e a Recriação da Tradição. Os régulos manjaco da Guiné-Bissau, ISCTE, Lisbon, 1999), the policy of colonization in Guinea-Bissau and colonial iconography ("Ambiguous Representations. Power and mimesis in colonial Guiné" in *Etnográfica*, Lisbon, 2002; *A Persistência da História* (ed., with João Pina Cabral), Lisboa, ICS, 2005; *O Visual e o Quotidiano*, ed., Lisboa, ICS, on press). She is currently conducting research on health and migration amongst african migrants in Europe ("De Paris a Jeta, de Jeta a Paris. Percursos migratórios e ritos terapêuticos entre França e a Guiné-Bissau", in *Etnográfica*, Lisbon, 2001).

**Cristina Udelsmann Rodrigues.** Anthropologist, Master and PhD in Social Sciences/African Studies. Currently researcher in African Studies at the Centre of African Studies (CEA), ISCTE in Lisboa. She has been working for several years about Angola, urban dynamics and economy and society. Has also some experience in other Portuguese Speaking African countries and has worked/is working in subjects such as Social Protection, Informal Economy, Local Economic Dynamics, Urban Dynamics, Modernity, Social Stratification. Participates currently in research projects about Poverty and Peace (as coordinator) and Local Economic Dynamics (CEA coordinator). She is the author of *O Trabalho Dignifica o Homem: estratégias de famílias em Luanda* (2006, Lisboa, Colibri). Has worked for the Government of Angola in an assessment about the structures and programs in the area of youth in Angola and in an assessment about the ex-combatants' reintegration program.