Generations Past

YOUTH IN EAST AFRICAN HISTORY

EDITED BY
Andrew Burton and Hélène Charton-Bigot

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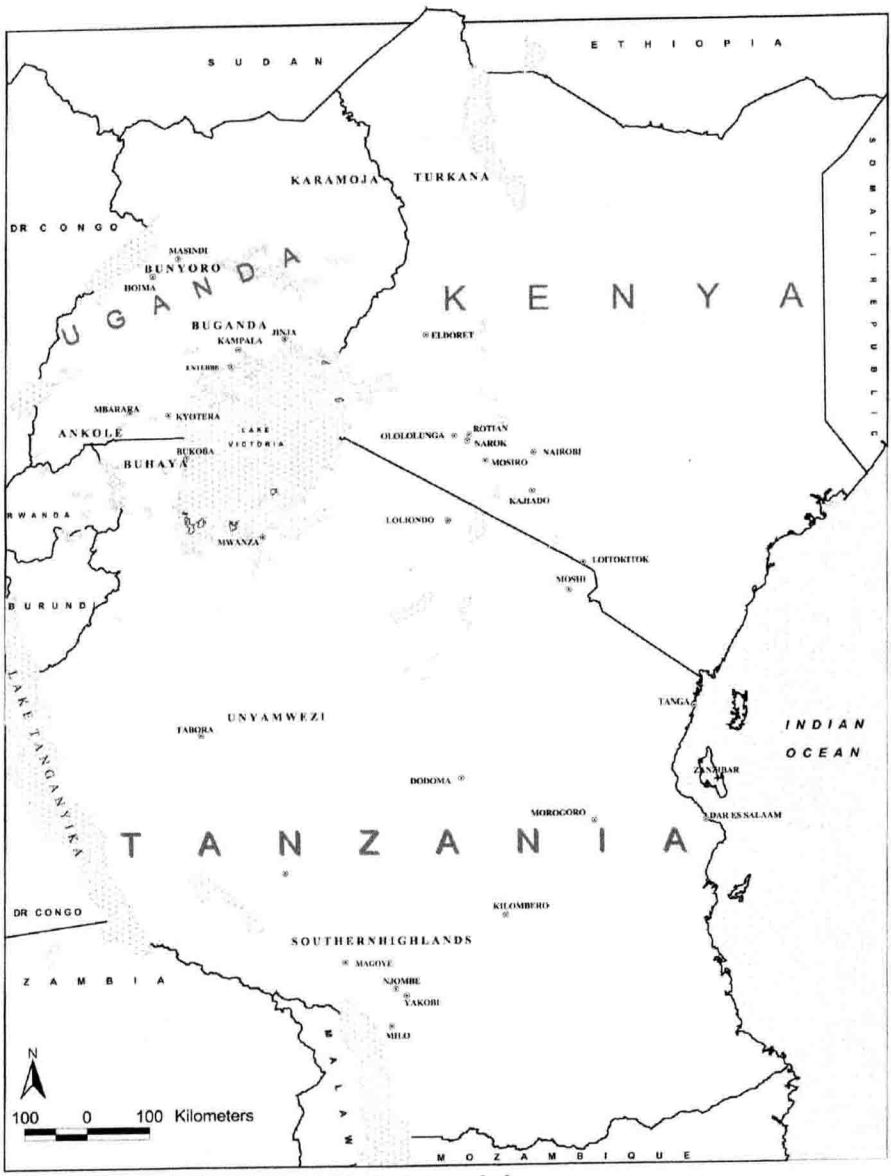

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Introduction

G. THOMAS BURGESS AND ANDREW BURTON

GENERATION HAS LONG formed a key theme of Africanist scholarship. For much of the twentieth century anthropologists produced classic monographs on age-grades and age-sets in rural societies, frequently observing how formal rituals such as initiation and marriage mark the passages of the life cycle and endow Africans with status, control over resources, wisdom, and civic virtue. They characterized gerontocracy and patriarchy as systems of order and/or dynamic tension, and correctly observed that, at least in male society, no concept or social category surpassed generation both in terms of its importance in governing relations and as a source of values and sensibilities. In no way fixed or immune to internal or external pressures, patriarchal discourse and ritual served as references and anchoring principles that were inherited, contested, and reinvented over time.

Although anthropologists developed a series of well-rehearsed understandings and explanatory terms such as age grades and age sets, their ethnographies did not always examine how, particularly in the colonial era, the common understandings and institutions that had long governed relations between generations—and which constituted a key means by which Africans maintained social order—were experiencing profound and often irreversible change. The major exceptions were studies animated by colonial worries over the perceived decline of "tribal" discipline. What is perhaps more obvious now is that, as young people in Africa migrated in greater numbers to towns and cities, their immersion in a new world of urban tastes, sounds, and stimuli, and new encounters with diverse peoples and conditions led to relative anonymity and often a process of personal reinvention and the embrace of new identities. Generation lost its fixed currency and was often reduced to the status of a secondary or tertiary category—and for most scholars a conceptual afterthought. And as the village and clan in Africa lost integrity—at least in the eyes of many observers—as reportedly timeless and self-enclosed entities, so also in Africanist literature did the concept of youth lose its once seemingly immutable aspect. While some anthropologists and others sought to understand and chart the endurance or demise of gerontocratic values and control over the young, most scholars by the 1970s chose, if anything, to simply note the

youthfulness of their actors, to recognize youth as a transitional category, while paying little attention to the label as a discrete social—or analytical—group.[1] Most anthropologists no longer considered generation fashionable or compelling and turned toward the study of other categories such as gender, class, and ethnicity. Historians were particularly uninterested in generation as a conceptual tool.

Of late, however, this has begun to change. After absorbing some of the recent advances made in African studies, scholars now find themselves better placed to reexamine categories such as generation that once had, and continue to have, descriptive power. And as historians begin to assume the same confidence regarding the examination of postcolonial Africa as they have long possessed in their analyses of colonialism, they will likely find the endurance of generation as an ordering principle and means by which Africans explain the world as a promising field of research. In the first decade of the twentieth century scholars have, fortunately, revisited youth, and a number of major, interdisciplinary conferences have taken place with generation as the organizing theme. An important literature on the subject is emerging.[2] As an academic topic, it appears that youth has—so to speak—come of age. This is equally true of East Africa as of other parts of the continent.[3]

Some publications chart the emergence of a "youth bulge" in African populations.[4] However, youthful predominance has in fact been characteristic of African societies for at least half a century now. Taking mainland Tanzania as an example of continent-wide trends, the first reliable national census in 1948 discovered 45 percent of the population was under sixteen and almost 90 percent under forty-five. In the 1957 census the percentages of those under sixteen and forty-five were broadly similar. Breaking the age groups down further one discovers a full 70 percent of the population was 29 or under. Children remained the dominant group; those from birth to age fourteen constituted 42 percent of the overall population. By contrast, that section of the population which might be characterized in the African setting as having reached full maturity—those over forty who as elders would have achieved positions of seniority and power in local societies—represented a mere 17 percent of the total population. The main features of this lopsided age distribution continued throughout the remainder of the twentieth century. In the most recent 2002 census those aged twenty-nine or under constituted 76 percent of the total population; those forty and older, 17 percent.[5] Given the numerical preponderance of the young in Africa, the recent scholarly interest is hardly surprising. Indeed, when children and youth have formed a demographic majority from at least the middle of the last century, one may ask why youth has not attracted more attention and, in particular, why generation has not been at the heart of historiographical analysis.

Population statistics suggest that the young matter, but they don't explain why or how. Probably the greatest proportion of recent interest in youth derives, unsurprisingly, from the questions raised by Africa's demographic imbalance, which is often blamed for a series of social, economic, and political problems. Many now embrace the term "youth crisis," the general contours of which include accelerating

urbanization, chronic underemployment, delinquency, violence, and the spread of HIV/AIDS. This crisis appeared more obvious in the late twentieth century, when many states in Africa were no longer able to maintain patrimonial ties and networks sustained over previous decades, and underwent a process of contraction and at least partial collapse. In the 1980s and 1990s hundreds of millions of young people were less able to look to the state to provide a minimum of security, employment, or education. Failures on the macro political level worsened an already intense competition over scarce land, work, and schooling. Michelle Gavin observed that "[m]any of Africa's youth are [now] caught in a Peter Pan scenario gone terribly wrong. Try as they might, they cannot seem to become adults."[6]

While observers disagree over the precise relationships between demography, underdevelopment, weakening social ties, and political crises, it is hard not to see a broad correlation among all of these, or that youth may serve as both victims and unwitting agents of general crises. Jon Abbink noted that although young people are often victims of a "faulty modernization," and that to be young in Africa has come "to mean being disadvantaged, vulnerable, and marginal," it is also true that "[b]y their sheer numbers, their availability, and their eagerness to take up anything that may relieve them of conditions of poverty, idleness or ennui, youth are easily recruited by political parties, armed groups or criminal networks."[7] The title of Abbink and van Kessel's edited collection, *Vanguards or Vandals,* illustrates the ambiguous position in which many youth find themselves today. The phenomenon of the child soldier, of a boy or girl at the same time vulnerable and ultra-empowered, speaks tragically of the limits to which young people in Africa could be pushed at the end of the twentieth century by poverty and hopelessness. Exploited by thugs and warlords who force them to perform ritualized acts of inhuman violence—in a modern-day perversion of what in precolonial times was a fairly common warrior ethic—gun-toting youth have played an obvious role in state collapse from Somalia to Sierra Leone. In this instance global media images do not necessarily deceive; they suggest the capacity of youth—in limited and specific locations—to both resist and reproduce systems of violence and exploitation, to both desire and destroy a social order that provides a minimum of security and opportunity.[8] According to Frederick Cooper, the "blockages of generation" in the late-twentieth century produced an "apocalyptic destructiveness" among young people.[9] The crisis of the postcolonial state is at least partly a crisis of the process of maturation, particularly for males.

Few would disagree with the term "youth crisis." Discerning the extent to which the crisis has contributed to—or been the consequence of—the weakening of Africa's social fabric and the decline of the state remains, however, one of the more challenging research agendas in African studies. Gavin observed that "[i]t is easy to develop a generalized sense that "youth bulge" is code for marauding, angry young men,"[10] even though such violence has become a way of life for only a relative unfortunate few. Another continual temptation is to assume that generational conflict and the youth "crisis" are only about as old in Africa as the millions the term is intended to represent, when in fact it is much older. Nor is

youth involvement in crime and violence anything new; the service rendered by child and youth soldiers to latter-day warlords has its precolonial analogue, when during the slave trade youth in Africa performed a similarly destructive role for equally exploitative elders.

Another temptation is to consider youth violence a problem unique to Africa—an example of African exceptionalism—or to be certain that there is something in youth that is inherently violent. It's also easy to ignore the social, economic, and political contexts of violence. No one has perhaps drawn more attention outside the academic community to Africa's youth crisis than Robert Kaplan, for whom—in his travels through West Africa in the 1990s—young men were "out of school, unemployed, loose molecules in an unstable social fluid that threatened to ignite." Visiting a slum in Cote d'Ivoire, Kaplan observed, "Geology, like the birthrate . . . appeared to be unduly accelerating. Here, young unemployed men passed the time drinking beer, palm wine, and medicinally strengthened gin while gambling on pinball games. . . . These are the same youths who rob houses at night in more prosperous Ivorian neighborhoods. . . . The decaying, vegetal odor . . . was intense. Nature appeared far too prolific in this heat, and much of what she created spoiled quickly."[11] Kaplan's remarkable claim that crowds of unemployed men in West Africa constituted a serious potential threat to the security and stability of Western societies became, after September 11, 2001, more or less accepted wisdom in the sphere of American policymaking, as fears of terrorism spawned by poverty and injustice overlaid worries about the capacity of the West in an era of globalization to quarantine itself from Third World crises.

Most scholars working in Africa would probably disagree with such an assessment; moreover, we consider it our duty to understand, with some degree of sympathy, the social origins of such violence, and to resist the slur of "senseless" violence often imputed to African societies. Yet the character of youth violence in Africa is not always clear. What is it that strikes the observer most immediately or remains after long reflection—the strategic and rational aspects of violence or instead its lumpen and whimsical cruelty? Donald Donham reminds us that "one of the crucial properties of violence" is "the inherent potential to 'unmake' the social world, to create murk and uncertainty. Sometimes analysts will not be able to rise above this murkiness, and pretending to do so may be one of the most serious kinds of misrepresentations of violence."[12] The difficulties of rising above such uncertainty may explain why sometimes we, like Kaplan, depend on literary evocations of the "youth crisis" and employ similarly apocalyptic and totalizing terms to describe its violence. For example, youth in the 1990s, due to lack of education and employment, were "a smoldering fire ready to burn African urban areas."[13] Youth are often the "mutant citizens of the modern nation, purveyors of its violent undersides."[14] "Illegality has become the norm for young people and their territory for affronting the permanent counter-violence of the state."[15]

The uncertainties inherent in understanding the origins of youth violence extend also to any assessment of the global or continent-wide conditions faced by contemporary African youth; in some treatments "youth" becomes a catchall

existential category that encompasses all the subaltern despairs—and desires—of the postcolonial condition. Such youth are also sometimes hard to pin down. They are at the center and the periphery; they are at the forefront and at the margins; they are empowered agents, and they are hapless victims; they are everywhere and nowhere, everything and nothing. Yet not entirely so: they do overwhelmingly tend to be urban, hypercosmopolitan in their consumer tastes and cultural repertoires, and utterly precocious in their rejection of their elders and the social imaginary of the postcolonial state. In the memorable words of Mamadou Diouf, youth in Africa are engaged in "the radical questioning of the nationalist discourse, of its imaginary and the totality of its texts." They have "embraced irregular ways and adopted dissident and unconventional practices that transport them towards worlds where Africa is either absent or ignored."[16] Youth are seeking "the constitution of individuality on the margins of the ethnic group, citizenry, and the state." They reject "the past of ancestors, traditions, and the state."[17]

There is no denying the distance between pre- and postcolonial Africa, or that patriarchal and nationalist narratives have in some settings been eclipsed. Yet such an exclusive emphasis on precocious resistance and the "logic of rupture"[18] invites a corrective response. The same applies to a more general fixation shared by journalists and academics alike on youth violence. Both Frederick Cooper and Jay Straker have recently and separately called for more attention to the "invisible" and "inaudible"[19] cousins of the hyperhip left out of such accounts. "Before African youth becomes intellectually recast as a protean social collective that operates mysteriously beyond the nation-state and the entire postcolonial epoch," Straker writes, "one should check in with the local youths to find out precisely what is on their mind at the millennial turn." He asserts, based on his research among secondary school students of Guinea's forest belt, that the world evoked by some scholars would appear "strange to the great majority of African youth struggling to forge optimal lives in settings where, for the foreseeable future, matters of nationhood, state authority and local socio-cultural customs still impinge powerfully on everyday life." Straker's young informants "eschew rather than embrace or embody socio-historical rupture." They "seek improved possibilities for productive citizenship within the structures of community, nation and epoch they already know, love, and hate."[20]

Generation *does* help to explicate contemporary crises, both as an idiom for ordering social and political relations and as a language of values and attitudes centered, for example, on such questions as how a boy becomes a man. The quest for masculine respectability, which animates young political actors, officers, and child soldiers to wage war or make peace, seems at the very heart of the matter. Yet it is a mistake to assume that all the study of generation can possibly yield are further insights into war and conflict in African history. Generation speaks to the core of social sensibilities in Africa and how they are reproduced and reinvented over time.

As the study of generation continues to develop, we will likely see more works that seek to gender our understandings of "youth." While both males and females

are included in the language of generation, its emphasis was and is masculine. In precolonial patriarchal societies, men were the leading antagonists in contests over access to public power, women, and ritual authority. John Iliffe observes that "[c]ompetition for wives in polygynous societies made conflict between male generations one of the most dynamic and enduring forces in African history, whereas the ample availability of land minimized other forms of social conflict."[21] Richard Waller notes that in colonial times, "youth" had more relevance to the experience of males; adolescence was largely a male category.[22] For girls and women, the lines of conflict were more commonly drawn along lines of gender than generation. In light of the complex and fluid ways in which individuals have sought through the maturation process to become men or women, it is likely that separate studies of male and female and generations will continue to emerge. The pursuit of both masculine and feminine success and dignity have been key animating principles of historic change, in Africa as on other continents; the most violent crises of maturation have been predominantly male crises, hence the male bias in the scholarly literature.[23] With the recent rise of violence as a specific category of research, the male bias to youth studies will likely continue.[24]

In general, generation embodies a rich and shifting language of rights, duties, and expectations that in the past and until now helps explain what Africans perceive to be the bases for both social order and chaos. To what extent gerontocratic values have endured or deteriorated and how these processes relate to images of past order and present chaos seem to make up a promising research agenda. Certainly the decline of village institutions, secret societies and rituals dedicated to reproducing knowledge, respect, and discipline, and the incapacity of the postcolonial state to sustain modern institutions of comparable pedagogical power appear relevant to the questions asked by a growing assortment of observers of Africa's contemporary "youth crisis." How did children and youth in precolonial times learn the duties and rights of membership and belonging? And how do they arrive at such notions today? Generation seems important enough for scholars to be willing to engage with rather than walk away from the category's subjective meanings, especially when they remember that such contingency, when compared with that of other identities, is in no way exceptional. This collection aims to address some of the existing absences in the study of youth and generation, offering exploratory accounts of the position of youth in East African societies over the past two centuries.

Youth in East African History

Scholarly reluctance to study youth in part derives from doubts about the label's utility as an analytical category. What usefulness does a term have if it refers to a possible majority of the population, or does not seem to be discrete, homogeneous, or possess any constant boundaries in terms of class origins, interests, worldviews, gender, or even age? Definitions of "youth" emerge out of local idioms and circumstances and are constantly shifting, located somewhere between ten and as

much as forty-nine years of age.[25] It's easier to simply note the youthfulness of historical actors, or that youth play a key role, both positive and negative, in the continent's history and current conditions, than to work toward a set of common understandings about youth that are neither banal nor easily assailable. How can youth be defined? How is the category constructed? Is youth a primary or secondary identity? Are young people to be known as "youth" or by some other name? Do youth share distinct characteristics as a stage in the life cycle? With the intelligibility of youth agency in doubt, generation has frequently served as an ambiguous and obscure reference point on historiographical maps.

It's helpful to remember that in twentieth-century East Africa, generation constituted both a hard and a soft conceptual category, both an "ancient" and a temporary cultural label. Youth appeared as a recognized phase in the life cycle, carefully framed and enshrined by a continuous cycle of public rituals, and possessing a host of well-established understandings regarding its characteristics and functions. Young males were often cast as warriors, servants, or tolerated delinquents. In such communities a high value was placed on age, reproduction, continuity, and security. Where discontinuity was more decisive, however, youth emerged less as a phase in the life cycle than as a historical cohort. Youth were defined less by a set of inherited discursive constructs than by unique historical circumstances and narratives that set their generation apart from others before or after, and which allowed a greater degree of negotiation, flux, and invention.

A vast anthropological literature has emphasized youth as an "ancient" category and has asserted that generation in East Africa to varying extents determined men's access to authority, status, women, and ritual power. The reverse was also true: distinctions in male society between autonomy and dependency were expressed locally through generation. In some groups, pastoralist societies in particular, generation embodied a series of precise and highly articulated rankings, each rank or age grade possessing a considerable degree of affinity and connectedness, and with its own codes of discipline. Although women sometimes employed their own age rankings, the tensions embedded in relations between female generations did not as often provide the substance of village ritual, since public authority remained largely a masculine preserve, in protest of which the women often organized. Eisei Kurimoto and Simon Simonse note that women did not overlook "the opportunity the system offered them: to unite in opposition to the men."[26]

Male initiation rites, meanwhile, celebrated seniority and provided instruction that reinforced age deference as a principle necessary for communal cohesion. They institutionalized stratification, promised eventual advance, and gave generational antagonisms an acceptable and controlled public expression. They were "as much arenas for power games" as "a mechanism for dealing with corporate tasks or a ceremonial façade for gerontocratic power."[27] In most agrarian societies, meanwhile, social promotion was achieved through the institution of marriage. A "youth" was typically a bachelor without the resources, as yet, to marry and to exercise authority over the labor of his wife or wives and children. Marriage wasn't just an initiation that ended an age of reputed irresponsibility; it signaled

a man's promotion, however contested, to the rank of overseer. Thus if Marx defined classes according to their access to modes of production, anthropologists have repeatedly described how, despite endless local variations, access to women and reproduction determined men's generational status.[28] The manner in which juniors in Africa have historically been cast as clients in relation to their elders has been as real as class divisions between workers and capitalists in Europe.

Such systems were characterized by conflict as much as cooperation. Female agency, for example, often complicated conflicts between junior and senior males over women, cattle, and land. All-male generational disputes were sometimes forgotten when women sought to renegotiate their rights as wives and daughters. Junior and senior men formed alliances when their control over wives and daughters was threatened.[29] Or not. Justin Willis writes that in precolonial East Africa junior-senior male relations were characterized by constant strain, hostility, insubordination, and the potential for violence. Young men posed serious challenges through their indiscriminate cattle raiding or when they seduced the wives of their elders. "Men's collective power was threatened by the sexual power of women and the sexual weakness of men. . . . The seductive power of women regularly breached the imagined solidarity of elder men, creating disputes amongst those who claimed to control society."[30]

Youth referred not only to a system of ranks but also to a world of social expectations, of ideas of duty, honor, and virtue. While Meru youth in precolonial Kenya were supposed to abstain from alcohol and sex, and display their bravery and cunning through cattle theft and combat, their elders were exempt from such expectations.[31] Such social mores were most sustainable during periods of security and social stability; in conditions of natural catastrophe or social crisis, youth rebelled against such standards. When youth in large numbers were unable within the village or clan to marry and assume adult status, the patriarchal principles that served as the bases for village ethics lost meaning and force. Age corresponded less and less with generation, inheritances were postponed or lost completely, and junior status extended indefinitely. Such delays undermined the capacity of the old "to manipulate knowledge and re-invent tradition"[32] and encouraged juniors to look for exit options from dependence on their seniors. When young men were no longer convinced they could realize respectability through their patience, conformity, and best efforts, they looked for alternative ways of advancing their status outside the community. Through migration, long-distance trade, or slave raiding they could escape a system that failed to offer promotion, or only did so after what young men regarded as intolerable delays. Warlords able to acquire guns and ranks of young followers threatened lineage systems that awarded power and privilege according to ancestry and seniority.[33] Young men turned to violence as an opportunity, then and now, to seize and usurp power, women, and status, especially in conditions of deteriorating patrimonial ties.

While gerontocratic practices and discourses endured throughout the twentieth century, changing political and economic conditions forced revision and adaptation. Colonialism introduced unprecedented tensions between youth and

elders, in part through the contradictory ramifications of policies pursued. On the one hand, as they erected early structures of colonial governance the British sought to access legitimacy in East Africa by identifying and associating colonial rule with established indigenous, mostly gerontocratic, sources of authority. Under indirect rule officials invariably turned to elders in their attempts to understand, and to order, local societies; in doing so they fossilized relations between young and old at a time of unprecedented change. Indeed, Christianity, capitalism, and urbanization infinitely complicated generational relations. "Two aspects of [colonial] subjection most offended men of honour [i.e., elders]," observes John Iliffe, " . . . loss of authority over the women and young people of their homesteads."[34] From the early colonial period elders voiced perennial complaints bemoaning the degenerative impact of foreign influences on youth behavior.[35] As in other parts of the world, such complaints had cyclical characteristics as one generation contrasted nostalgic, idealized versions of their youth with the behavior of their successors.[36] The pattern extended into the postcolonial period as familiar concerns continued to be voiced.[37]

For many Africans, their colonial journeys compelled an encounter with at least selected elements of the modernist package. They went to school, migrated long distances, worked for wages, and became responsible for their own bridewealth payments. They adopted new religious identities and became "self-made" men and women of the towns. Colonial conditions undermined the categorical stability of generation as young people reevaluated their roles, rights, and duties in society, in reference to accepted wisdom and the texture of public rituals, as well as a new set of social and economic relationships of unique colonial provenance. In such circumstances young people gained the analytical distance to question the validity of gerontocratic discourse and the assumption that superior age should automatically endow their elders with specialized knowledge, wealth, or ritual power. Their distance from patriarchal expectations only increased when colonial policy began to shift around 1940. During World War II and its immediate aftermath officials abandoned elders as conservative relics of an outmoded African past—though they often retained a certain administrative and rhetorical utility—in favor of a younger generation exposed to colonialism's more progressive aspects.[38]

By the postwar years, seniority was in many respects no longer celebrated so much as youthfulness—both by the colonial state and younger educated Africans who increasingly came to share a developmental rhetoric in their analysis of African problems. The experience of young people in a range of colonial institutions produced new knowledge, skills, and attitudes. As they distanced themselves from networks that defined juniors as subjects of their seniors, young people came to support and to elaborate a discourse of rights that came to challenge both patriarchy and the colonial state. Juniors possessed more exit options from years of servitude to their seniors, or at least the choice between different forms of servitude. Young people in one way or another sought to redefine their rights and obligations as both subjects and citizens. Jean-François Bayart claimed that "the period of the whites became one of insolence, where 'children' 'with fire in their belly' broke

their silence."[39] Among the Giriama of Kenya, "youth" became synonymous with money and social independence.[40] Young Gusii women eloped with their male lovers and fought over the nature of marriage with both their fathers and husbands.[41] Makonde elders in Tanganyika lamented in the 1950s that young migrant laborers had "lost all their manners. They are too proud."[42]

Mission Christianity fed off generational tensions. The new faith promised young Meru of Mt. Kenya redemption not only from sin, but freedom from the blessings and curses of the ancestors and older generations.[43] The missions reshaped the process of maturation, particularly for girls, whose initiations they considered obscene. They had new things to say about sexuality, work, play, courtship, and marriage, and structured opportunities for advancement according to observed obedience to Christian norms.[44] Mission schools taught new notions of masculinity and femininity and forms of duty and discipline that separated juniors and seniors, Christian and non-Christian youth. Seeking to become men and women, youth negotiated the conflicting pressures and influences of patriarchs and missionaries.[45] As Richard Waller has recently pointed out, the erasure of rites for both young women and men left them often uncertain of their status.[46] Warrior bands were abolished, and village ceremonies and festivals died out. Education, Christianity, and capitalism combined to end, or at least dramatically modify, the formation of formal age-sets and the intense group solidarities that such rankings aroused.[47] In Meru, local elders, in alliance with the colonial state, sought to end the initiation through excision of girls into womanhood.[48] Youth left their home societies and sought inclusion in colonial towns, where the means to achieve social promotion were often improvised rather than inherited.[49] Immediately influential was the ideal of "productive masculinity, tamed by work and made responsible through the obligations of marriage and citizenship, and of modern wifehood that taught girls the disciplines of a new but still subordinate domesticity."[50]

It is, however, easy to overstate the revolutionary dimensions of social change in the colonial era. The new ideas and opportunities were in no way equally extended to all. Waller writes that elders "continued to hold most of the cards throughout the colonial period. They controlled marriage, access to land and livestock, education, employment, and also the social knowledge that the young would need to survive and prosper. . . . Only the most alienated youth were beyond their reach."[51] Though references in oral histories and colonial archives to the new autonomies of young men and women are legion, most youth, especially in rural areas, remained dependent on their seniors. And if the cultural and economic currents of colonial rule did help to produce educated, commercial, and working "classes" that embraced the progressive rhetoric of late-colonial developmentalism, the flip side was a growing class of young Africans whose contact with modernity was rather more ambiguous and who, colonial officials believed, had a solvent effect on traditional social order. The colonial state, despite its progressive rhetoric, was still largely reliant on "tradition," the health and vitality of which it viewed with as much concern as African elders solicitous of social stability and customary order.