THE TIME OF YOUTH

Work, Social Change, and Politics in Africa

Alcinda Honwana

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常州大学山书馆
藏书章

Kumarian Press

A Division of Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc. • Boulder & London

Published in the United States of America in 2013 by
Kumarian Press
A division of Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc.
1800 30th Street, Boulder, Colorado 80301
www.kpbooks.com
www.rienner.com

and in the United Kingdom by
Kumarian Press
A division of Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc.
3 Henrietta Street, Covent Garden, London WC2E 8LU

© 2012 by Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc. All rights reserved
First published in 2012 by Kumarian Press.
Reprinted here from the original edition.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Honwana, Alcinda Manuel.
The time of youth : work, social change, and politics in Africa / Alcinda M. Honwana.
— 1st ed.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978–1–56549–471–8 (cloth : alk. paper)
ISBN 978–1–56549–472–5 (pbk. : alk. paper)
1. Young adults—Africa—Economic conditions—21st century. 2. Young adults—Africa—Social conditions—21st century. 3. Young adults—Employment—Africa.
4. Unemployed youth—Africa. 5. Africa—Economic conditions—21st century.
6. Africa—Social conditions—21st century. I. Title.
HQ799.A35H665 2012
305.242096—dc23 2012003535

British Cataloguing in Publication Data
A Cataloguing in Publication record for this book
is available from the British Library.

Printed and bound in the United States of America

The paper used in this publication meets the requirements of the American National Standard for Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials Z39.48-1992.

5 4 3 2 1

To my daughters, Nyeleti and Nandhi,
for being a constant inspiration in my life

Acknowledgments

This book was made possible by the many young people who generously allowed me to gain insights into their lives, sharing their time, describing their experiences, and discussing their views with me. To them I owe my biggest debt of gratitude.

I am indebted to all the research assistants who contributed to this project over the years, particularly Sidy Ba, Dorra Chaouachi, Katya Chavel, Charles Chiconela, Ziyad Chonara, Celso Give, Celso Inguane, Dércio Ivan, Yassine Lechiheb, Milton Machel, Sandra Manuel, Noureddine Mhamdi, Nabeelah Mussá, Najmeddine Najlaoui, Tarek Rekik, and Lindsey Reynolds. Their research, interviews, assistance with literature reviews, and guidance in navigating youth spaces were precious.

I am grateful to colleagues who read and commented on the proposal and various drafts chapters: Ibrahim Abdullah, Brigitte Bagnol, Hakim Ben Hammouda, Jean Comaroff, Peter Geschiere, Joe Hanlon, Beatrice Hibou, Hazel Johnson, Raphie Kaplinsky, Ron Kassimir, and Teresa Smart. I am also thankful to Nabil Mâalel, Zohair El Khadi, Sleheddinne Ben Fredj, Rezgui Mondher, Mia Couto, Carlos Nuno Castel-Branco, Paula Monjane, Albertina Mucavele, and Stephanie Urdang for the stimulating conversations.

The Department of Anthropology and Archeology of Eduardo Mondlane University in Maputo, the Institute of Economic and Social Studies in Maputo, Kula Estudos e Pesquisa Aplicada in Maputo, the Department of History at Cheikh Anta Diop University in Dakar, the West Africa Research Centre in Dakar, Codesria and ENDA in Dakar, the Department of Anthropology at Witwatersrand University in Johannesburg, the Ali Belhouane Youth Cultural Club in Tunis, and the UNDP Country Office in Tunisia all made their facilities available to me and provided invaluable support; I particularly thank Adriano Biza, Hélder Nhamaze, Ndiouga Benga, Ousmane Sene, Ebrima Sall, Carlos Cardoso, Fabrizio Terenzio, Sami Essid, Aida Robbana, Francesc Revuelto-Lanao, and Fodé Said Condé.

A special word of thanks goes to Grey Osterud, my editor, for her guidance throughout the writing process.

This research was possible thanks to a grant from the Ford Foundation, which allowed me to conduct fieldwork in Mozambique, Senegal, and South

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Africa; I am grateful to Alice Brown and her colleagues for believing in this project. The Conflict Prevention and Policy Forum at the Social Science Research Council in New York supported my research trip to Tunisia; I particularly thank Tatiana Carayannis.

I owe my deepest gratitude to my husband, João, and my daughters, Nyeleti and Nandhi, for their love and unwavering support. They endured my prolonged absences on research trips and the innumerable hours I spent in front of the computer. This book became a family project, as I often discussed these issues with my daughters, who are both over eighteen, and was inspired by their fascinating insights. My husband was often on hand to share ideas and read drafts; his acute political sense and fine editing skills were invaluable. Writing this book would have been a very lonely process without them.

Preface

I have been conducting research on young people in Africa for almost two decades. My work with young men and women affected by armed conflict, which culminated in *Child Soldiers in Africa* (2006), was a logical precursor to this project. As difficult as the social reintegration of former child soldiers was, the situation of youths who were not directly involved in war was not much easier. The trauma that former child soldiers had suffered presented specific psychosocial challenges, but their social and economic transition to adult independence was no different from that of other young people living in conditions of economic scarcity, unemployment, and myriad social ills. This examination of the challenges faced by young people more generally grew directly from that work.

The research for this book began in 2008 in Mozambique and was expanded to South Africa, Senegal, and Tunisia, which I visited during the first half of 2011. In these four countries I met young people from a range of social and economic backgrounds. I conducted individual interviews and focus-group discussions with students, young professionals, musicians and other artists, activists from various fields, and unemployed young men and women carrying out the most diverse activities to try to make ends meet. Young people were eager to tell their stories. In long individual interviews I listened to their life stories and their views about their peers, their elders, the economy, and politics. Focus-group discussions were undertaken with diverse groups of young people. Some were all female, some all male, and some mixed. Others involved people with common interests, such as musicians and performers. I also spoke with groups belonging to particular organizations, such as party youth leagues and civil society associations. Most focus groups considered specific topics, and participants debated and exchanged views among themselves. I also took time to interact with young people in places where they normally hung out, such as youth clubs, restaurants, and bars. Occasionally I was invited for meals at their homes and had the opportunity to meet their parents, siblings, and other relatives. The fact that my research assistants were themselves quite young facilitated my access to their social networks; I met their friends and then the friends of those friends, creating a snowball effect. My research assistants mediated

between my young informants and me, as they advised me about the "dos and don'ts" and explained what was considered "cool" and "uncool." They provided useful insights regarding ways of broaching difficult subjects. Although I speak the major languages of all four countries, they also translated and helped interpret some of the discussions conducted with young people in their mother tongues, especially Wolof in Senegal and Arabic in Tunisia.

In addition, I interviewed government officials, religious leaders, scholars, journalists, and public intellectuals who are concerned about youth. These interviews provided information about the ways these societies look at young people, specific policies and programs designed for them, and youths' place in the economy, society, and culture.

Most of the research was conducted in urban settings, although I occasionally visited rural areas. Many young people who grow up in the economically undeveloped countryside seek a solution to their pressing problems in the cities. African cities are teeming with young men and women trying to survive on the margins of formal socioeconomic structures. For many, the city becomes a place to forge new ways of living free from the constraints of rural society. In the countryside, youth have no platform for action not only because resources are limited but also because older people tend to monopolize power; indeed, some call rural communities gerontocracies. The city promises anonymity, a degree of chaos that allows for personal freedom. Here they find possibilities for improvisation, experimentation, and *desenrascar*—literally, to disentangle themselves from a situation, and metaphorically, to improvise a solution from almost nothing at the very last moment.

The young people I interviewed described their daily life struggles as well as their aspirations. They shared amazing stories of resilience and survival under dire circumstances. What do you do when you come from a poor family and at the age of twenty-seven you still have no job? How can you have a steady girlfriend if you cannot afford to take her out for a drink and offer her a cell phone card to call you, or even buy a card to call her yourself? How can you marry? What do you do when you have children and you cannot afford to feed them, much less live in your own household? What kind of a future awaits you when just getting through each day is a struggle? These were some of the difficult questions that some youths would throw back at me; of course, I had no answers. I was amazed by their agency as they actively set out to live as fully as possible despite their circumstances. I was equally struck by their capacity to understand the broader structural forces that shape their everyday lives. I was most impressed by their creativity and the commitment to citizenship that they sustained amid such a chaotic and

often improvised existence. Young people are involved in a myriad of associations and activist groups and deeply engaged with the issues that matter to them, often on the margins of formal political structures and ideologies.

Young people were very clear about the ways they wanted me to portray them and the messages they hoped I would deliver on their behalf. They are keenly aware of the disapproving ways parents and elders, governments, and the media generally depict them. In this book I try to bring their own voices to the fore by using as many direct quotations as possible and providing information about who they are in order to allow the reader greater insight into their lives. The book focuses on the stories of many of these youths: men in Maputo who survive by scavenging in the city's garbage dump; Mozambican *mukheristas*, young women who engage in small-scale, cross-border trading without paying import taxes; young South Africans whose only form of livelihood is sporadic overnight shelf-packing in supermarkets; Senegalese street vendors and those desperate enough to try to make the dangerous crossing to Europe in small *pirogues* (boats); Tunisian university graduates working in European-owned call centers; young women and men who get "sugar daddies" and "sugar mamas" to be able to pay high school fees and buy fashionable goods. I also introduce readers to rappers who criticize the status quo, protesters who force governments to reverse unsound policies, and revolutionaries who topple dictatorships. Indeed, young men and women do not merely wait for their lives to change. They are proactive and wake up each day with the goal of making their own lives better despite their depressing circumstances. These stories are those of young people who are surviving and thriving against the odds.

Rather than generalizing or making comparisons among youths' experiences in the four countries, this book explores young Africans' varied situations and their responses to the challenges they face. While it does not cover all aspects of young people's lives, the various case studies presented reflect some of the main activities undertaken and referred to by young people at that time in those places.

Why did I focus on Mozambique, South Africa, Senegal, and Tunisia? Being Mozambican and having done extensive research on Mozambique made that case a natural choice. But I sought to do research that would encompass the experiences of youth beyond any one country, to develop a broader view and understanding of the condition of youth and the coping strategies they are adopting across Africa. I decided to look at South Africa and Senegal because I have lived in both countries and have an extensive network of contacts that could facilitate my research. Following the events that initiated the "Arab Spring" (which, thus far, has been an "African

Spring"), it became obvious that I had to include either Tunisia or Egypt in my research; I focused on Tunisia because that was where the upheaval started. Over the past decade I have been fortunate to develop a wider understanding of the interconnections and specificities of young people's experiences in various African countries and beyond through engagement in multi-country and multi-regional studies and discussions. This book builds on those exchanges, drawing from the rich insights and debates with colleagues working on youth in various national and regional contexts.

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Chapter 1

Youth

In 1963 Bob Dylan wrote "The Times They Are a-Changin'," a song that prefigured the youth uprisings of 1968 in Europe and the United States.[1] Half a century later, in August 2011, thousands of British youths from the most impoverished boroughs of London and other cities took to the streets to protest the killing of Mark Duggan, a twenty-nine-year-old black British man, in Tottenham, North London. In addition to burning police cars, they took advantage of the chaos to loot and destroy shops. They stole electronics and fashion statements such as Nike sneakers, Hugo Boss clothing, television sets, mobile phones, computers, and iPods—all desirable symbols of a consumer culture from which many young people, especially the unemployed and disadvantaged, felt excluded. As Ken Livingstone, former mayor of London, observed, this is the first generation of youth who expect to be worse off than their parents. Young people in these neighborhoods feel deprived. They feel they have no stake in British society, and they are prepared to do anything because they have nothing to lose.

Though unexpected, the riots in Britain were not isolated incidents. In October 2005 young people in Paris suburbs took to the streets burning buildings and cars. The protests were sparked by the deaths of Bouna Traoré, age fifteen, and Zyed Benna, age seventeen, of Mauritanian and Tunisian descent respectively, whose immigrant fathers worked as dustmen in the streets of Paris. The young men died of electrocution in a power station they entered while fleeing from the police. In the economically marginalized Paris *banlieues* (suburbs) populated by mostly North African immigrant families, the relationship between young people and the police was already very tense. Police brutality was routine, and youths would flee when a police car approached even if they had not committed any offense. Nicolas Sarkozy, then minister of the interior, was quoted as saying publicly that he wanted "to rid the town of hooligans," "to clean the *racaille* [scum] of the suburbs with *Kärcher*" [a brand of high-pressure water washer] (Canet et al. 2009). In such a climate of mistrust, residents were appalled by the government's declaration that the police had done nothing wrong, and the riots took a

turn for the worse, spreading to other French cities. Thousands of vehicles were burned, at least one person was killed, and about three thousand protesters were arrested.

In North Africa, a twenty-nine-day youth uprising in Tunisia led to the ouster of President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali on January 14, 2011. Like the uprisings in London and Paris, the Tunisian revolution was triggered by the death of a young man: the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, a twenty-six-year-old unemployed street vendor from the inland town of Sidi Bouzid, following the confiscation of his wares by a municipal police officer. Bouazizi's death symbolized the despair of an entire generation of young men and women grappling with unemployment and bleak future prospects. Thousands of youths came out into the streets and cyberspace to demand jobs, better living conditions, and respect for their dignity. The brutal and disproportionate use of force by the authorities radicalized the protests. Youths chanting "Ben Ali Degagé!" (Ben Ali Go!) demanded the president's departure. The Tunisian revolution quickly spread across the Arab world, and a few weeks later young Egyptians took control of Tahrir (Liberation) Square for days of protests that toppled the forty-year reign of Hosni Mubarak in February 2011. Conflicts between youth and the state also erupted in Bahrain, Yemen, and Syria. The youth-led armed rebellion in Libya that began in February overthrew Moamar Gaddafi and culminated in his death in October 2011.

In September 2010 I was in Maputo when thousands of Mozambican youths staged riots against the government to protest the rise in prices of basic staples such as bread, water, and fuel. Angry youths blocked the streets of the capital, burned tires, and confronted the police who tried to disperse the crowds. The police used batons and tear gas and fired bullets at the young protesters, causing numerous injuries and more than ten deaths. In June 2011, shortly after I visited Senegal, hundreds of young people, rallying alongside the Y'en a Marre! (Enough Is Enough!) Movement, clashed with police. They were denouncing the eighty-five-year-old president's push to change the constitution to enable him to win a third term and create the post of vice-president, supposedly for his son. Thousands of protesters gathered outside the National Assembly, where lawmakers were debating the proposed constitutional amendment, protesting government corruption, high unemployment, and other social ills. Clouds of tear gas enveloped the square as police fought the demonstrators with rubber bullets and water cannons. The demonstrations quickly spread from central Dakar into the suburbs and three major towns in the interior. More than a hundred protesters were injured during the two days of rioting.

These events illustrate what is happening around the world: young people, in rich and poor countries alike, share the same concerns and aspirations and are beginning to assert their rights as citizens. They are rising up against unemployment, socioeconomic marginalization, unsound economic policies, corrupt governments, political exclusion, and lack of respect for their rights. These are cries for freedom by a generation yearning to make a place for itself in the world. In the cities of Senegal, Britain, Egypt, Tunisia, France, and Mozambique, frustrated young people strive to receive a good education, find decent jobs, attain adult status, and partake in the fruits and symbols of global capitalist consumption. The idea of a utopia full of freedoms and opportunities is beginning to erode, as is the assumption that the state will uphold the social contract with its citizenry and put in place effective institutions and welfare systems.

Youth are a critical indicator of the state of a nation, of its politics, economy, and social and cultural life. Studying youth involves not only studying the lives of young people themselves, in all their diversity, but also understanding the social, political, economic, and cultural concerns of adults. The two generations are entangled in complex processes of construction and reconstruction, the making and remaking of society (Honwana and De Boeck 2005; Griffin 1993).

This book focuses on young people in Africa, where the marginalization of youth appears to be most serious. But the examples already cited suggest that the issue is global and that the African experience has broader relevance. The book is based primarily on interviews conducted with youths over eighteen years of age in four countries: Mozambique, Senegal, South Africa, and Tunisia. It explores young people's everyday activities and coping strategies in the face of inadequate education, massive unemployment, poverty, and HIV/AIDS.

Youth in Waithood

The majority of African youths are today grappling with a lack of jobs and deficient education. After they leave school with few skills they are unable to obtain work and become independent—to build, buy, or rent a house for themselves, support their relatives, get married, establish families, and gain social recognition as adults. These attributes of adulthood are becoming increasingly unattainable by the majority of young people in Africa. They are forced to live in a liminal, neither-here-nor-there state; they are no longer children who require care, yet they are not yet considered mature social adults.[2] They lead a precarious existence; their efforts are

centered on trying to survive each and every day. Young Mozambicans used the Portuguese term *desenrascar a vida* (eke out a living); young Senegalese and Tunisians employed the French term *débrouillage* (making do); and young South Africans spoke about "just getting by." All these expressions vividly convey the extemporaneous nature of these young people's lives.

Waithood, a portmanteau term of "wait" and "-hood," is the best way to describe this period of suspension between childhood and adulthood. It represents a prolonged adolescence or an involuntary delay in reaching adulthood, in which young people are unable to find employment, get married, and establish their own families. I became interested in exploring waithood because many of my young interlocutors in these countries repeatedly expressed the sense of being "on hold" or "stuck" (Sommers 2012) in a situation with bleak future prospects. Mohamed,[3] a twenty-eight-year-old Tunisian man, pointed out, "I finished my studies but can't find a job; I can't help my parents and marry my girlfriend." Twenty-four-year-old Tandu, from South Africa, commented, "I survive on odd jobs to try and make ends meet." These narratives make it clear that, in order to understand the predicament of youth in Africa today, it is fundamental to examine their waithood experience and their struggle to become independent adults.

The notion of waithood was first used by Navtej Dhillon and Tarik Yousef (2007) and Diane Singerman (2007) in their work on youth in the Middle East and North Africa. Waithood suggests the multifaceted nature of the transition, which goes beyond securing a job and extends to other aspects of life, such as access to learning opportunities, household formation, and civic participation. Young people in waithood are increasingly unable to become social adults and full-fledged citizens. While the notion of waithood might give a sense of passively lingering, I want to push this concept further to show that young people in waithood are not really inactively "waiting" for their situation to change. Despite the challenges, youth in waithood are dynamic and using their creativity to invent new forms of being and interacting with society. Waithood accounts for a multiplicity of young people's experiences, ranging from daily survival strategies such as street vending and cross-border trade to involvement in gangs and criminal activities.

Waithood represents the contradictions of modernity, in which young people's opportunities and expectations are simultaneously broadened and constrained. They are enlarged by the new technologies of information and communication that make young people more globally integrated. Youth relate to local social structures and cultural patterns, but they are also connected to global culture via mobile telephones, cyberspace, television, and advertising. At the same time, they are also constrained by lack of access to basic resources due to unsound socioeconomic policies, epidemics, and

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