

BOOK REVIEWS

ANTHROPOLOGY AND SOCIOLOGY

Paula Heinonen. *Youth Gangs and Street Children: Culture, Nurture and Masculinity in Ethiopia*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2011. vii + 180 pp. Bibliography. Index. \$99.00. Cloth. \$25.00. Paper.

During the 1990s and 2000s many countries in Africa and elsewhere in the developing world experienced an explosion of street children and youth gangs in their urban centers. Scholars and other observers attribute the increase in the number of children and youth making a living and/or living on the streets to myriad causes: poverty, structural adjustment policies and other forces of globalization, drought, famine, floods, political instability, and civil wars. Paralleling the growth of these groups, Paula Heinonen notes in *Youth Gangs and Street Children in Ethiopia: Culture, Nurture and Masculinity*, has been an explosion in the growth of international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) whose mission it is to address the needs of these children and their families. These NGOs, along with scholars, the media, and politicians in industrialized countries, typically portray street children and their families as dysfunctional, their lives dominated by violence, neglect, abuse, and low levels of education and health care. Solutions usually involve a combination of social welfare schemes and law enforcement which, even when implemented, barely scratch the surface of the problem.

In her study of homeless street gangs and home-living street children in Ethiopia, Heinonen argues that most of what we know and understand about these young people is a distortion. Based on six years of field work in Addis Ababa, *Youth Gangs and Street Children in Ethiopia* provides a careful ethnographic examination of the lives of male and female children as many of them passed from childhood to adulthood and parenthood before Heinonen's eyes. There is violence, to be sure, but it comes mostly from the police, members of the public, and fellow gang members. The street children in her study lived with their families (a limitation of the study, as this is not necessarily representative of street children, generally, throughout the world). They were entrepreneurial and often parented their siblings and even their parents. Many attended school, using their trading and other earnings to pay their school fees. Street gang members did not find the gang to be a substitute family, as much of the literature asserts. Instead,

the street gang members among whom Heinonen worked “were not only at odds with one another most of the time, but frequently went in and out of groups” (2–3). Gang violence was often perpetrated against female gang members, who were sexually abused, sexually exploited, and raped by male gang members, particularly in mixed-sex gangs.

Heinonen found that central to understanding the lives of street children and youth gangs in Ethiopia—their livelihoods, criminal activities, and interactions with one another, with parents, and with other members of their communities—is the concept of *yilunta* (shame, honor, or family pride), which “promotes hegemonic masculinity within the ‘wider Ethiopian’ culture and accounts for the gendered nature of how Ethiopian children are socialized and how gang members operate” (8). *Yilunta* (also understood as saving face, considering what others will think) ensures that children (no matter their age) respect and behave deferentially toward adults, particularly adult males, and that females behave in a submissive and subordinate manner toward males. Specifically, in relation to street children and youth gangs, *yilunta* requires girls to reflect the qualities of femaleness (modesty, chastity, virginity, submissiveness), no matter the circumstance (trading on the street at all hours, rape by an older man, gang rape by members of the gang). For boys, *yilunta* requires that they be brave, fearless, somber, quiet, and able to provide for their families. Heinonen notes that proving that one “has *yilunta*” leads boys to a great deal of male-on-male violence, particularly among gang members (33, 35).

Heinonen places her study within the context of street children and youth gangs globally. To be sure, there are common threads that link the experiences of poor children worldwide. However, her study could have benefited from a more pointed focus on the literature on African street children and youth, past and present. Much richer insights could possibly have been unearthed by comparing and contrasting the experiences of children and youth in Ethiopia, where war, political instability, political repression, and famine have persisted for much of the contemporary era, with the experiences of children and youth in South Africa, the Congo, Sierra Leone, and even neighboring Somalia, where political and other violence and instability have also been staples and where local forms of hegemonic masculinities shape male and female experiences of family, childhood, and street life.

Nevertheless, anthropologists and others seeking to conduct research on urban children and youth in Africa and elsewhere will find in Heinonen’s study a useful methodological approach to understanding their lives: broad surveys, undergirded by a small number of intensive case studies, and a lengthy period of time spent in the field. That time allowed Heinonen the opportunity to study her subjects’ lives as they struggled to transition to life as adults, bounded, nevertheless, by crushing poverty, inequality, and *yilunta*.

Beverly Grier

North Carolina A&T State University

Greensboro, North Carolina

bcgrier@ncat.edu

doi:10.1017/asr.2013.89