Youth and Ethnic Movements and Their Impacts on Party Politics in ECOWAS Member States

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Abstract

Although they historically played a pivotal role in the fight against colonial rule—as they have in recent attempts to entrench multiparty democratic processes—the role of youth in political parties in West Africa has received less than commensurate attention in studies on democratization. Unlike in advanced democracies where parties are key agents of political socialization and leadership, parties in West Africa are built on ethno-religious foundations. A peculiar character of highly marginalized youth thus becomes inevitable, both in politics and decision-making processes of the state. To assert themselves, the youth have also become agents of destabilization of the democracy they partook to build. Apart from their involvement in political violence, youths are now available as unconscientious "foot soldiers" of ethnic militias and terrorist groups that are constituting increased social problems in West Africa. In this article, we examine how parties and youth have interacted to define the emergence and character of threat to the nascent democracies in contemporary West Africa. The article interrogates how the notions of "youth" and "political participation" have continued to play out in different West African countries within the context of the opportunities and challenges of Africa’s youth bulge on the democratization process. The article observes that the marginalization of West African youths has been part and parcel of history only that their situation has further raised the stake as agent of social disorder in the absence of positive engagement in the recent times.

Keywords

Africa, area studies, humanities, regional history, history, political economy, economic science, social sciences, election studies, legal studies, political science, government and representation, party politics

Introduction

Political parties are indispensable in ensuring effective governance, and ensuring that the oft-touted dividends of democracy reach the ultimate beneficiaries—the citizenry (Epstein, 1986). By definition, political parties are political organizations or a coalition of individuals and groups with shared political beliefs, ideologies, and orientations typically pursuing the goal of controlling government and the apparatuses of administrative power within a state. Beyond this broad goal, political parties generally serve two subordinate ends: First, they serve as veritable agents of political socialization by helping to spread and deepen democratic principles and practices; and second, as political institutions with internal political processes and practices, they help to mobilize and aggregate the choices available to the electorate. Invariably, finding the proper conditions and context for the smooth and effective regulation of political parties is of key importance to entrenching and deepening democracy anywhere (Akande, 2000).

The wave of democratization that started in Benin during the early 1990s opened a floodgate of multiparty political transitions in West Africa that were previously under military or one-party civilian rule. In quick successions, each of the countries embraced—with varying degrees of success—different forms of multiparty political systems. Indeed, except for a few reversals—especially those occasioned by the outbreak of civil wars (for instance, in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Cote d’Ivoire) or low-intensity conflicts motivated by stalemated crisis of political succession (Guinea, Mali, Togo)—most West Africa have now held one form or the other of electoral contestation or peaceful change of government during the past decade. Beyond the issue of number, the point could also be made that political developments at the turn of the 1990s have expanded not only the space for the enthronement of democracy but also greater popular participation in the process. Of course, several reasons have been adduced for this monumental shift in the template of politics. First are those who are persuaded that the development grew out of the upsurge of a global pro-democracy mood consequent on...
the triumph of Western-style liberal democratic order after the Cold War.

Our modest intention here is to investigate the currency of the marginalization of the youths, who not only were prominent in the struggle to enthrone party-system democracy but also constitute large number of the populace. We intend to establish that the marginalization of West African youths has been part and parcel of history: a situation that has further raised the bars of social disorder in the recent times and adversely implicates on the socio-political and economic developments in the sub-region. We also intend to interrogate whether the youth-dominated ethno-religious violence of late 1990s till date are independent of lack of gainful engagement of the more than 70% youth populations across the region. In Cote d’Ivoire, for instance, the prominence of the youth in the bloody civil war on September 19, 2002, cannot be overemphasized. In the more ethically variegated Nigeria, the involvement of the youth in the ethnic—along with religious—clashes has assumed renewed public concern since the return to civilian rule in May 1999.

In the final analysis, the article investigates how the youths are reacting to, or perhaps coping with, the role of the dominant political elites (godfathers, money-bags, etc) and their domination of the political space, the lack of any clear-cut and well-articulated political ideology by the major political parties that could foster sustainable development, their chances of being elected into offices without financial empowerments, especially against the backdrop of dearth of internal party democracy even where political parties openly trump their democratic credentials. What options are available to the youths as a politically dependent and vulnerable groups with the firm grips of the power elite. With the creation of youth wings and its entrenchments in party constitutions in the region, this article will examine whether the plights of the youth could be ameliorated. The article will also appraise how the youth could gain more access to power and accrue political gains in the events of the increased activities of supranational bodies, especially, the ECOWAS, in political parties’ internal democracy and electoral outcomes recently. In this article, therefore, a modest attempt is made to examine the interactions between youth, ethnic movements, and political parties in West Africa. Specifically, the rest of this article will be devoted to the following sub-themes: (a) the dialectics of African politics and the youth; (b) the changing nature and involvement of youths in early West African politics; (c) ethnicity and West African politics; (d) youths involvements in contemporary West African political parties; (e) democratization, party politics, and the West Africa youth; (f) challenges before ECOWAS to prevent youth marginalization and ethnicity in internal party democracy in ECOWAS member states; and (g) conclusions.

The Dialectics of African Politics and the Youth

Ekeh’s (1975) postulation that politics refer to the activities of individuals insofar as they impinge on the public realm made up of the collective interests of the citizenry offers an instructive overview in addressing lop-sided political space of Africa in which the youth is highly marginalized. If anything, Ekeh’s effusion consolidates the time-hallowed truism that if politics mean the administration of the polity, and policy is the agglomeration of collective interests of members of the public, it must target the greatest good for the greatest number of people. Ekeh affirmed Wolin’s (1960: 2-3) assertion that, “One of the essential qualities of what is political, and one that has powerfully shaped the view of political theorists about their subject-matter, is its relationship to what is ‘public.’” Going by the profound domination of youth in the geometry of Africa population, the notion of “public” as a realm in which all interest are on the front-burner has completely eluded African political space. Comparatively, the conception of politics in Africa as a monolithic public realm in which number counts is far-fetched.

Despite the demographic tilt in favor of the youth in these states and the clear emergence of a “youth bulge” in African populations, the notion “youth” is a concept still evolving. Most states in West Africa hardly have operational definition of “youth” not to talk of addressing the problems they experience. In Nigeria, the best definition of “youth” can probably be inferred from the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) Act, Cap. 84, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria (2004), which by virtue of Section 2(2) states that “a person shall not be eligible to serve in the [Nigerian Youth] Service Corp if . . . he is over the age of thirty.” In the absence of any constitutional or definitive statutory provisions, guesswork could therefore be made at best that, in Nigeria, a young person is one who is not more than 30 years of age. The point of emphasis here is not the designation but on the confusion and marginalization that the lack of definitive statement might occasion. For instance, the positions of “Youth Leader” that most political parties in Nigeria have created and entrenched in their constitutions are more often than not occupied by adult persons who are more than 50 years of age. In some other social/political circles, the slogan “young shall grow” is of common usage to recap the need for adults to be more inclined in attending to issues pertaining to the young ones. In the absence of a clear-cut characterization, the confusion as to who exactly is a “youth” in West Africa rages on in the literature. For instance, the findings of Duruji (2010) on the age distribution and membership spread in both the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and Oodua Peoples’ Congress (OPC) refuse Adejumobi’s (2001) postulation that ethnic militia organizations in Nigeria, of which he included both MASSOB and OPC, are youth-based organizations. Duruji (2010) pointed out that if youthful age is assumed to range between 15 and 30 years, only 25% of MASSOB members are youths, which means that the overwhelming remaining 75% are adults, some of whom are in their late 40s and 50s. The same is true of the OPC, which has a slightly higher proportion of the youth respondents (43%), meaning that about 57% of members are adults. Yet, it is hard to put a pin
between Adejumobi’s (2001) position, which is more native to the elasticity of age distribution of youth in African societies, and Duruji’s (2010) rational distribution that bears credence to life-stages emergence in the advanced world.

Thus, uncertainty beclouds the agency and identities of “youth” in the West Africa sub-Region. This uncertainty leads to lack of understanding of the origins of youth violence and also extends to any assessment of the global or continent-wide conditions faced by contemporary African youth as agents of disorder (Olaiya, 2012). Such youth are also sometimes hard to pin down to any age group or status. They are at the center and the periphery; they are at the forefront and at the margins; they are mis-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, hyper cosmopolitan in their consumer tastes and cultural repertoires, and utterly united in the vanguard of perceived socio-political disorder. Despite the fact that youth bulge has characterized most African societies for close to a century now, a perusal of the constitutions of states has revealed that, sake for Cape Verde Constitution (1992), which devoted a chapter to youth, there is a general lack of recognition of youth as an important element of development. Article 71 of the Constitution of Republic of Cape Verde (1992) states, inter alia,

1. Every young person shall have the right to special protection from his family, the society and the State which should allow him to develop his personality, his physical and intellectual capacity and integrate himself fully into the social, cultural, political and economic life.

2. The family, the society and the State shall promote the conditions for the free participation of young people in the political life and in the economic and social development and for the realization of their social, cultural, political and economic rights.

3. The State and the society shall stimulate and support the creation of youth organizations aimed at pursuing cultural artistic, recreational, sportive and educational goals.

4. The State, in cooperation with the associations representing parents and education guardians, as well as the private institutions and the youth organizations, shall adopt a national youth policy to promote and foment the professional education of young people, the access to their first employment and the free intellectual and physical development of youth.

However, the Constitutions of Sierra Leone (1991) and Liberia, countries that experienced devastating civil wars of which the youth was among the most affected, contain not even a single mention of the word youth.

The above provisions from the Constitution of Republic of Cape Verde (1992) are the most extensive in West Africa. Yet, they lack in proper characterization, direction, and contextualization suitable enough to address a well-coordinated agenda for the youth. Thus, although population statistics suggest that the young matter in West Africa, they don’t bring about the much-needed attention it deserves. As Olaiya (2012) has pointed out, it is mainly in the 1990s (two decades ago) that youths in sub-Saharan Africa starts being consistently considered as something more than a life stage or a process of becoming adults, by focusing on young people as social actors. He argued that the increased visibility of youth within African studies is explained by a conjunction of factors such as the demographic weight of youth (young people constitute a burgeoning majority of African population), the longstanding economic deterioration in several African countries that heavily affected the social mobility of young people, as well as their participation in violent practices and adoption of marginal lifestyles. In the same vein, Burgess and Burton (2010, pp. 2-3) argued that “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.” It thus remains warranted that the term “youth crisis,” the general purview of which includes burgeoning urbanization, mass underemployment, juvenile delinquency, communal/socio-political violence, and the spread of HIV/AIDS, must be embraced. Failures on the macro political level worsened an already intense competition over scarce land, work, and schooling. 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. Burgess and Burton (2010, p. 4) strengthened Michelle Gavin’s observation 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.”

Robert Kaplan’s (1996) book is also revealing. While traveling through West Africa in the 1990s, Kaplan observed that young men were not attending school yet largely unemployed, and thus constituting an unstable social fluid that threatened to ignite. While visiting a slum in Cote d’Ivoire, Kaplan observed that “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.” It is also true that “exploited by thugs and warlords who force them to perform ritualized acts of inhuman violence, gun-toting youth have played an obvious role in States collapse from Somalia to Sierra Leone (Burgess & Burton, 2010, p. 3).

The Changing Involvement of “Youths” in Early and Contemporary African Politics

By the time the Pan African Congress and the National Congress of British West Africa (NCBWA) were held in Paris and Accra in 1919 and 1920, respectively, the most
prominent African participants did not fall within the dominant chronological age bracket that is now regarded as “youthful.” The organizer of the congress, W. E. B. Du Bois (1863-1963), was about 51 years of age, while key participants (including Blaise Diagne, who later became the first African Deputy in Senegal in 1927), averaged 52 years. The Gold Coast nationalist, J. E. Casely-Hayford (1866-1930), also organized the NCBWA in 1920 at the ripe age of 56. Similarly, by the time the fourth Congress took place in 1945, the two prominent delegates of West African descent, Kwame Nkrumah (1909-1972) and Obafemi Awolowo (1909-1983), were both 46 years. In addition, James Churchill Vaughan was 56 years when he formed the Nigerian Youth Movement (NYM) in 1936, a formidable youth party that 2 years after, in 1938, successfully defeated the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP) to claim the three tickets to the Lagos Legislative Assembly. By the time the founding Secretary General of the NYM, H. O. Davies (1905-1989) left to found his own party, Nigerian People’s Congress (NPC) in 1951, he was about 57 years of age. The first political party in Nigeria, NNNDP, was formed by Herbert Macaulay (1864-1946) in 1923 at 50, whereas Nnamdi Azikwe (1904-1996) only became the Secretary General of the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC) in 1947 at 43. These men were the architects of the formation of notable political parties that fought and won political independences for their respective countries in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

One reason for drawing attention to this “historical fact” is not only to show that the marginalization of West African youths has been part and parcel of history only that their situation has further raised the bars of social disorder in the recent times. Not only this, the notion of “youth” is alien to early politics in West Africa just as there is a nuanced understanding of the term “youth”—in comparison with adulthood—in the context of Africa that is based on an individual’s ability to meet socially ascribed responsibilities even when they have passed this age, he or she is considered to be an adult. Paradoxically, even the ECOWAS, has adopted the dominant chronological age bracket that is now regarded as “youthful.” The organizer of the congress, W. E. B. Du Bois (1863-1963), was about 18 and 25 years. Surprisingly, this formidable demographic bulge is taking place against the background of prolonged socio-economic predicaments, volatile political changes, and incidences of state failures that are further accentuating the marginalization and exclusion of youths from strategic governance structures where decisions affecting them are made without consultation. There are several implications from the above for society and politics in West Africa. In the first instance, the distinction between “modern-civic” and “traditional-primordial” notions of youth is at the root of some of the social tensions and sparks in different countries. For example, a growing number of young people are not able to meet socially ascribed responsibilities even when they have moved into adulthood based on chronological age (e.g., 40 years and above). Second, because the enabling conditions and social infrastructure necessary for them to make a smooth transition from youth to adulthood are not readily available—a development that is due to and exacerbated by harsh and lingering socio-economic conditions in many countries—the phase of youth becomes frustratingly elongated, and sometimes, an endless limbo. Third, and arising from this last point, the generally impoverished conditions of youth not only make them vulnerable to the vagaries and vicissitudes of growing up but also predispose them to manipulation by adults and occasional acts of violence; the kind that is now very rampant in many countries. Fourth, the condition of youth is creating endless tensions within the wider society as reflected in their relationship with adults. Indeed, the point had been made elsewhere about the deepening suspicion and unstable relationship between youths and societies such that among the adult generation, the fear of youths seems to have become the beginning of societal wisdom. For keen observers of contemporary West Africa, therefore, it is not difficult to come to terms with the fact that the youth issue is now crucial to understanding and explaining the dynamics of social and political changes (Richards, 2002). Besides, on a broad note, youths have become central and strategic to the making and unmaking of social and political order in Africa since the start of the present millennium as developments in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Cote D’Ivoire, the DRC, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Mozambique, Sudan, to mention a few of the recent flashpoints in Africa (Nkwachukwu, 2008; Olowu & Wunsch, 2004; Sandve, 2009; Sesay, Ukeje, Aina, & Odebiyi, 2003).

Thus, in spite of the fact that the present demographic bulge in Africa is in favor of youths, a 2005 report by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UN/ ECA) indicated that 21% of young people within the ages of 15 to 24 were unemployed, higher than the 14.4% global average. The vast majority of these youth are unskilled, underemployed, and unemployed. A major implication of this situation, at least for their participation in society and politics, is that the expectation that youths should play an avant garde (vanguard) constructive role in contemporary
African politics has failed to materialize. In those instances when they do, it is usually to play the so-called “politics of the belly” by operating on the fringes of the political space as foot soldiers (described further below), thugs, bouncers (described below), and youth wing, and to perform other uncivil responsibilities. The foot soldiers or bouncers and so on refers to a pack of able-bodied men armed by the leaders of parties to be deployed for the provocation of violence or counter-violence. Across board, their presence as active players in the mainstream of political leadership is miniscule, and only in short interval; the only exceptions often been the children of established politicians “anointed” by their political godfathers. In most instances, youths desiring to join mainstream politics are either crowded out by the old politicians who have the resources and networks to win or made to wait their turn until much later. This scenario is usually compounded by the fact that money and money bags play a major role in party politics in many West African countries.

Because they are generally crowded out of mainstream political processes, only few creative outlets are available for the kind of political socialization regime to mold them into responsible politicians or politically aware citizens (cf. Stark, 1958). For the most part, indeed, this development partly explains why a large number of young people are only able to find meaning for their lives within the poorly regulated informal sector, a space that is distinctively characterized by anonymity and criminality. In extreme cases, the foreclosure of youth access to subsidized socio-economic opportunities and the political space where their voices could be heard and interests taken care of, is partly why many of them have been prominent actors in many social upheavals across the sub-region: from the violent activities of youths in Nigeria’s volatile oil region to that of the lingering ethn/o-religious attacks by Boko-Haram sect in the Northern parts of Nigeria and civil wars in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Cote d’Ivoire, and so on. It would appear that it is not by accident, for instance, that all the civil wars experienced in West Africa benefitted from the widespread availability of unemployed youths. With hindsight, the frightening outcomes of those conflicts would seem to suggest the need for more creative attention to the youth problem facing different countries in the region to avert future relapses. Clearly, the experiences of post-war Liberia and Sierra Leone have shown that ignoring the youth—especially those that actively engaged in the civil wars as child soldiers—could be a recipe for future social combustion. For instance, the eventual metamorphosis of the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) and the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) led by Charles Taylor and Forday Sankoh into major political parties and key players had significant implications for politics in post-war Liberia and Sierra Leone. In Nigeria, as well, key ethnic militia groups (OPC, MASSOB, the Arewa Boys, the Egbesu Boys, the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People [MOSOP], the Boko-Haram Sect) successfully defined and controlled political outcomes in their respective regions, including the formation and administration of political parties.

It is safe to add that for as long as they are on the fringes of society and politics, what the youths do would continue to have adverse effects on social change and political stability and security in different West African countries. Despite the myriad tensions that the present socio-economic and political statuses of the youth are provoking in many societies, there is concern that public policy at the level of individual states or the sub-region has failed to properly articulate and address the youth problem. While it cannot be denied that there are conflicting interests on the youth matters, public policy, where it matters, has not brought about the kind of qualitative paradigmatic shift to recognize and make necessary change that could holistically affect the youth. There is rhetoric, sung almost everywhere that the youth own the future, a ploy that seems to make for the present ineffective management or neglect of what matters the most to that generation. The willingness of the youth to be engaged in negative political and violent activities seems to be the recognition by them that by ignoring what matters the most today, there are no guarantees that their tomorrow would be qualitatively better and secured.

All of these have combined to create a social vacuum that social forces (inordinate politicians, ethnic entrepreneurs, insurgent movements, desperate political parties) have tried to fill by recruiting the available youth into activities that undermine social progress and development. The situation of the youth is also compounded by the fact that socio-political landscape in the sub-region is heterogeneous and deeply fractured. Because of this, any attempt to have a cohesive response becomes difficult to achieve. When put together, therefore, we see a dangerous scenario in which youths now constitute the leading actors in ethnic/sectional movements across the sub-region; intensely so given the increasing foreclosure of their access to subsidized socio-economic opportunities. What is therefore becoming evident is a vicious cycle in which the marginalization of youths in politics and society across West Africa is making it attractive for them to join and pursue divisive sectional and ethnic interest that could potentially undermine political stability and development in the sub-region.

Colonialism, Ethnic Politics, and Political Space for Youth in West Africa

There is no dearth of works on the colonial antecedent of African politics and how the current political system takes complete departure and pre-eminence from the pre-colonial and colonial periods, respectively, in colonized Africa (Boon & Eyong, 2005; Burgess & Burton, 2011; Ekeh, 1975). For the most part, the colonial policy of divide and rule used to strengthen European control and dominance is noteworthy as it affected post-colonial politics and ethnic relations and
culminated in discord and unhealthy competition among the ethnic groups in Nigeria (Ekeh, 1975). For instance, the 1953 Kano riots as a result of some value judgment stemming from perceived mistreatment of northern delegates by the southern crowd in Lagos for opposing the 1953 motion moved by Anthony Enahoro at the Federal House of Representatives for “self-government in 1956.” This proposal was not well-received by the northern delegates as a result of which the Sardauna of Sokoto and Premier of the northern region, the Northern People’s Congress moved, through Alhaji Ahmadu Bello, the adoption of an amendment changing the words “in 1956” to “as soon as practicable.” The attendant debate, according to Coleman (1958), was so “bitter and tempestuous” that the NCNC and Action Group (AG) members walked out of the House. The AG and NCNC were to later send delegates to the north to campaign for self-government. The result was the outbreak of a 4-day riot in Kano, which resulted in 277 casualties, including 36 deaths (16 northerners and 21 southerners).

Rather than being viewed as expressions of public opinion, the boooing of the anti-self-government members of the House in Lagos was immediately given ethnic interpretation and this led to a selective violence targeted at southerners domiciled in the north (Duruji, 2010). As Agbese (2001) pointed out, the colonial administrations invented the tradition of an “us versus them” syndrome in Nigeria. Duruji (2010) argued that because the colonial masters entrenched ethnic colorations of public policies, the character of the Nigerian state has not fundamentally changed in spite of the transition from colonial to post-colonial dispensation. Apart from the 1953 violent eruption that occurred in Kano, there has been an avalanche of violent ethnic eruptions in different parts of Nigeria cutting through the nooks and crannies of the nation. They include the 1981 bloodshed in Numan; the 1987 mass killing in Kafanchan and other parts of southern Zaria; the 1990 clashes in Wukari and Takun; the 1991 massacre in Tafawa Belewa and the mass killing in Kano city; the 1992 Zango–Katap bloodshed; the 1993 Andoni and Ogani blood-bath; the intermittent Warri crises between the Ijaws, Itsekiri, and Urhobo; the clashes between the Hausas and Yoruba in Sagamu, Lagos, Ilorin, and Ibadan; the Nasarawa crises involving the Tiv and other ethnic groups in that state; the Yelwa-Shendam and Jos clashes in Plateau state; and the 1980 and 1999 Ife-Modakeke clashes, among many others.

It is difficult, therefore, to antagonize Ekeh’s (1975, p. 97) assertion that “a fact of life in post-colonial Africa is the emergence of strong primordial ethnic groups in politics,” the propagation of which gave impetus and patronage to the demographic bulge of the youth. Adejumobi (2001) indeed characterized ethnic militia as “youth based groups formed with the purpose of promoting and protecting the parochial interests of their ethnic groups and whose activities sometimes involve the use of violence.” To worsen the scenario, the “African bourgeois” who took over from the colonial masters have objectively preferred to carry on with the business as usual, more interestingly because, as pointed out by Ekeh (1975), they gained their significance only within the context of the various African nations in which they are implicated. They have consciously implanted them in modern politics, more for want of legitimacy over larger political territories for themselves than by justifying that the primordial entities as corporate groups actually antedate the colonially created African nations. Ekeh (1975) pointed out rightly too that the context of the post-colonial Nigerian politics offers a gainful illustration of the magnitude of the actions of the legitimacy-seeking African bourgeois. He argued that today’s Nigerian ethnic groups developed their boundaries and even their character only within the context of Nigerian politics. Flowing from Ekeh’s (1975) postulations, it is arguable that the situation has been well entrenched in the social–political fabric of the Nigerian political system, either in festerling expansionist tendency or curtailing it. Such is the case in the attempt to carve out of the entire Northern region as one entity under the political umbrella of Arewa and ipso facto giving a backhanded impression that the North is occupied entirely by Hausa/Fulani. It was also the case that justified the carving out of mid-western region from the erstwhile western region to trim down the political influence of certain politicians. The domain-partitioning ideologue, in my view, cannot be robustly differentiated from the Scramble for Africa, also known as the Race for Africa or Partition of Africa that led to invasion, occupation, and amalgamation of strange bed-fellows in African territories by European powers during the New Imperialism period, between 1881 and World War I in 1914. Ekeh’s (1975) argument has therefore continued to hold sway that the “ideologies and myths” do have reality-creating functions, and the corporate character now attributed to various ethnic groups is the reality that flowed from the ideologies and myths invented by the bourgeoisie to consolidate their parcels of influence in the new Nigeria. He submitted that in the real sense, the boundaries now created for and the loyalties now attributed to the modern ethnic groups never existed before Nigeria was created as a corporate entity. According to him, what existed prior to formation of ‘Nigeria’ as a sovereign state “were amorphous polities: many were organized around city-states, others in kingdoms and quasi kingdoms, and yet others with the narrowness of villages with no conceptions of wider political entities within which they were implicated (Ekeh, 1975:105).” Another point of view that is quite different from the perspective discussed is taken by scholars who see the phenomenon of ethnic militia in Nigeria as cultural and inherent in the character of the Nigerian societies. Such scholars contend that a formation that either enforces laws or defends their communities has always been in existence (Barongo, 1987).

Almost across board, then, the endurance of the nation-state culture as an overarching political culture is closely tied to how ethnicity is produced, transformed, and twisted in
response to different circumstances and situations. In *Ethnicity: An African Predicament*, Francis Deng (1997) observed that virtually all modern African governance crises (and conflicts) have ethno-regional dimension. In contemporary Africa, the role of ethnicity in political systems received a boost with the ambition of Western-trained education elite—“proto-nationalist,” as Crowder (1968) described them—to accept the frontiers of the emergent independent African states constructed by colonial rule as constituting their countries. In West Africa, the “nationalists” identified themselves as Nigerians rather than Yoruba, Hausa, or Ibo; Gold Coaster rather than Akan, Ewe, or Guan; Senegalese rather than Wolof; and Ivoirians rather than Baoules (Crowder, 1968, pp. 405-407). However, the intention of the colonialist was not to eradicate ethnicity but to stem the expressions of nationalism they produce and perhaps also to prevent tribal conflicts. Thus, as a creation of colonial rule, ethnicity was partly responsible for sowing the seeds of democratic and governance misadventures that soon became rampant in post-colonial Africa. European colonialists set Africans against Africans by hand-picking pliable collaborators; constituted by the group that Frantz Fanon (1980) calls the “benis oui oui” or the “yes yes men.” It also facilitated the subjugation of African masses because ethnic strife provided an excuse for repressive military and police actions by colonial authorities—developments that, in turn, triggered the spate of coup d’état in most West African states. Clearly, also, the states so formed, its citizens, officials, and, indeed, the political parties lacked a strong sense of nationhood that placed them on the threshold of disastrous collapse at different times (Hugh Cliford, 1921). And because most post-colonial West African states are not fashioned as public property but to serve parochial and ethnic interest of those who created and control it, confusion routinely developed between notions of statehood vis-à-vis nationhood.

However, ethnicity by itself is not the problem. Instead, the problem of ethnicity derives from the manner in which it is mobilized by the political elite (Diamond, 1988; Osaghae, 1995; Otite, 1975). Elsewhere, the point had been raised by noting that

Because access to state power is recognized by most ethnic groups as a requisite for self and collective motivation, expression and reproduction, the local elites and ethnic entrepreneurs within group set the tone and agenda of politics in ways that are parochial, beneficial to themselves principally and then to the larger group. When the opportunity to access state power is forestalled, therefore, one of the first defensive mechanisms that an ethnic group readily mobilizes is that of collective, non-violent action but it scales up steadily towards militancy and violence. (Ukeje & Adebanwi, 2006, pp. 2-4)

Perhaps one area where the lingering effect of this dysfunctional post-colonial development most vividly shows has been in the formation of political parties along ethnic lines, with the bigger and dominant political parties coming from the largest ethnic groups whereas smaller ethnic groups produce weaker political parties. The formation of ethnically motivated political parties, mostly through the active connivance of colonial officials, led to the implosion of political parties with evident lack of internal democratic culture and values that is at the root of the generic failure of democracies in the sub-region. In Nigeria, for instance, the three major political parties formed during the heydays of independence were along ethno-regional lines: the NPC, AG, and NCNC dominated by Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba, and Ibo, respectively. During the Second Republic, the major political parties were also formed along ethnic lines with the National Party of Nigeria (NPN), Peoples’ Redemption Party (PRP), and Great Nigeria Peoples’ Party (GNPP) representing the north and the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) and Nigerian People’s Party (NPP) representing the south-west and south-east, respectively. Although the nascent political culture that is under construction since the return to civilian rule in 1999 has shown pan-Nigeria tendencies especially with membership and the activities of the key political parties (PDP, AC, APGA, PPA) cutting across traditional sectional divides, ethnicity continues to show a remarkable resilience in political discourses and contestations as the recent hot debate on zoning within the ruling party, the PDP, shows. The inevitable, even if tentative, conclusion is that in spite of recent developments associated with the transition to multiparty rule in the sub-region, the old pathologies associated with ethnicity and other sectional expressions have not receded—in some instances, indeed, they have witnessed a resurgence in a manner that threatens political and governance process.

A good reason for pointing attention to all these facts is to make plain that youth involvement in crime and violence in the contemporary West Africa has its colonial analogue. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) argued that “lawlessness and violence ruled the colonial [African] zones.” He quoted Fanon (1980) who himself experienced colonialism in his native country of Martinique and in Algeria that became his second home that

The colonial world is a world cut into two. The dividing line, the frontiers are shown by barracks and police stations. In the colonies it is the policemen and the soldiers who are the official, instituted go-betweens, the spokesmen of the settler and his rule of oppression. [. . . ] In the colonial countries, on the contrary, the policemen and the soldier, by their immediate presence and their direct action maintain contact with the native and advise him by means of rifle-buts not to budge. It is obvious here that the agents of government speak the language of pure force. The intermediary does not lighten the oppression, nor seek to hide the domination; he shows them up and puts them into practice with the clear conscience of an upholder of the peace; yet he is the bringer of violence into the home and into the mind of the native. (Quoted by Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013, p. 130)

If anything, colonialism strikes a chord in the history of Africa of the service rendered nowadays by child and youth soldiers to warlords. During the slave trade, youths in Africa performed similarly destructive roles for slave merchants,
not only to catch fellow Africans as slaves, who are mainly youths, but also to suppress any form of counter-aggression from the victims. Exploited by thugs and warlords who force them to perform ritualized acts of inhuman violence—in a modern-day perversion of what in pre-colonial times was a fairly common warrior ethic—gun-toting youth have played an obvious role in state collapse from Liberia to Sierra Leone. In this instance, global media images do not necessarily deceive; they suggest the capacity of youth—in specific locations—to transform systems of violence and exploitation, to destroy a social order that provides a minimum of security and opportunity (Burges & Burton, 2010). As Duruji (2010) argued, the youth wing of a political party are actually bodyguards, engaged in militarized struggle for the party used directly to push for power and political objectives. These politicians tend to discard these youths after elections, but the impurity acquired by these individuals in the process and the need to maintain their new lifestyle significantly in transforming them into a more cohesive militia organization most of which now hide under the banner of fighting for ethnically defined interests (Adebanwi, 2002). Just like the colonial masters did during the slave trade era, children, women, and the youth continue to be subjected to desolate working conditions in West Africa. For instance, child labor is no secret in cocoa and oil-palm plantations in Ghana and Nigeria, yet what they earn is a pittance in relation to their labor. In rubber plantations in Cameroon, a rubber tapper is expected to tap more than 550 trees of varying diameters, collect all the latex in an 8-hr working day for a wage equivalent to 1.39 Euros.

Democratization, Party Politics, and West African Youths

Since the 1990s, the political landscape in West Africa has changed significantly from the era of one-party civilian or military autocracy to a semblance of multiparty civilian rule. In retrospect, this is a fundamental shift given the governance status of many countries prior to the 1990s. However, there is a huge question mark, not just on the sustainability of the process but also on the extent to which gains from it have been able to percolate into every strata of the society, including the youths. For instance, there is a strong argument that the opening of the democratic space in many West African states has not brought the desired dividend of democracy to the vast majority of the people. Thus, although the spread of multiparty democracy in the sub-region has allowed the voices of the youth to become more amplified, evidence showed that citizens’ expectations that democracy would bring positive change have yet to materialize. Today, there are fears of reversals as the experiences of Guinea, where the military sacked a democratically elected government in January 2009, and Niger, where President Mamadou Tandja has created a political stalemate by changing the constitution to remain in power until he was ousted in a military coup on March 26, 2010 (Burges & Burton, 2010).

There are two contrasting views on the involvement of youths, not just in society but also in their roles and involvement in politics and governance processes. The first one denies the autonomous agency of the youth by insisting that they lack voice and action of their own distinct from agency of the adults. This perspective suggests that the role played by the youth in political and governance processes is often predefined by adults and merely passed over to youths. This “zombified” view of the youth is articulated by its protagonists who point to the role of godfatherism and money—two key electoral resources controlled by the adults and political elites across West Africa. From Wade in Senegal, Tandja in Mali or Eyadéma in Togo and Obasanjo in Nigeria, the political domain is dominated by recycled adults who have near absolute grip on politics and are able to use the resources at their disposal to manipulate the youth. Their continued presence has negated youth access to mainstream politics and processes. In all, the youths are not proactively engaged and this has implications for internal party democracy and the entire governance scenario. This perspective also suggests that even where youths are brought into politics, it is hardly on their own terms but those of the adults who bestride the political space like the colossus. Lacking in meaningful engagements, the youth continued to be subjected to desolate working conditions and various criminal activities.

In West Africa, there are several ways in which youths are co-opted. In Nigeria, for instance, the youth were at one important time in history utilized as agent of harmony and nation building. The immediate years before the establishment of NYSC Scheme were not the best of times for Nigeria. The country had gone through almost 3 years of civil war (1967-1970). At the conclusion of the war in January, 1970, the then head of state, General Yakubu Gowon, while declaring that there was no victor and no vanquished to calm frayed nerves, thought it wise to utilize the youth in political and governance processes. The first one contentious view of the youth is articulated by its protagonists who point to the role of godfatherism and money—two key electoral resources controlled by the adults and political elites across West Africa. From Wade in Senegal, Tandja in Mali or Eyadéma in Togo and Obasanjo in Nigeria, the political domain is dominated by recycled adults who have near absolute grip on politics and are able to use the resources at their disposal to manipulate the youth. Their continued presence has negated youth access to mainstream politics and processes. In all, the youths are not proactively engaged and this has implications for internal party democracy and the entire governance scenario. This perspective also suggests that even where youths are brought into politics, it is hardly on their own terms but those of the adults who bestride the political space like the colossus. Lacking in meaningful engagements, the youth continued to be subjected to desolate working conditions and various criminal activities.

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a. the proper encouragement and development of common ties among the Nigerian youths;
b. the promotion of national unity; and
c. the development of the Nigerian youth and Nigeria into a great and dynamic economy.

In farthest terms of the above aims of the scheme, the objectives were spelt out in the NYSC Act, Cap. N84, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria, 2004. Section 1(3) succinctly captures them:
3. The objectives of the Service Corps shall be to
a. inculcate discipline in Nigerian youths by instilling in them a tradition of industry at work, and, of patriotic and loyal service to Nigeria in any situation they may find themselves;
b. raise the moral tone of the Nigerian youths by giving them the opportunity to learn about higher ideals of national achievement, social and cultural improvement;
c. develop in the Nigerian youths the attitudes of mind, acquired through shared experience and suitable training, which will make them more amenable to mobilization in the national interest;
d. enable Nigerian youths acquire the spirit of self-reliance by encouraging them to develop skills for self-employment;
e. contribute to the accelerated growth of the national economy;
f. develop common ties among the Nigerian youths and promote national unity and integration;
g. remove prejudice, eliminate ignorance, and confirm, at first hand, the many similarities among Nigerians of all ethnic groups; and
h. develop a sense of corporate existence and common destiny of the people of Nigeria.

For the purpose of realizing the above noble objectives—at least taking them as they are—the same act goes on in sub-section (4) of Section 1 by providing that “the Service Corps shall ensure

a. the equitable distribution of members of the service corps and the effective utilisation of their skills in areas of national needs;
b. that as far as possible, Nigerian youths are assigned to jobs in states other than their states of origins;
c. that such group of Nigerian youths assigned to work together is representative of Nigeria as far as possible;
d. that the Nigerian youths are exposed to the modes of living of the people in different parts of Nigeria;
e. that the Nigerian youths are encouraged to eschew religious intolerance by accommodating religious differences;
f. that members of the service corps are encouraged to seek at the end of their one year national service, career employment all over Nigeria, thus, promoting the free movement of labour;
g. that employers are induced partly through their experience with members of the service corps to employ more readily and on a permanent basis qualified Nigerians irrespective of their states of origin.”

One reason that accounted for the following rather long excerpts is to point out that post-colonial leaders themselves appear to be aware that the youth are important in nation building.

In yet another instance, the youth are formed to youth wing of the mainstream parties, and quite often, these youth wings become a kind of pseudonym for foot soldiers or political thugs. Sometimes also, recognized leaders of youths are co-opted and offered token position to put a hold on the others. Either way, there is no systematic and consciously planned process for engaging youths in politics and governance process. It is deducible that a reason why the political

arrangements in many West African states have been dominated by adult recycling politicians is because most of the parties lack clear-cut process of renewal to accommodate the youth members and taking them through a process of political socialization that bring value-added opportunities to political parties and by extension governance of many West African states. Elsewhere in this article, we mentioned how the Nigerian political parties created and actually enshrined in their constitutions the position of “Youth Leader” only for the positions to be occupied by adults. More than anything, this buttresses the position that the party leaders in the various political parties are merely interested in creating a coordinating avenue for the physical mobilization of the youth not an attempt to create a corporate entity of youth to partake in the day-to-day administration of the parties.

The second view sees the emergence of a nascent agency of youths—that is, the one that might take a long time in asserting itself but is nonetheless beginning to crystallize. The view advocates that as more and more youths imbibe and develop new level of political consciousness and efficacy, they appreciate that it is only by greater involvement in political process would they be in the position to bring about desired changes. The pervasive lack of independent resources by the youth is however the bane of this view. To be accorded such rare chance, there is need for the new-breed set of youth to embark on self-development in educational and vocational credentials to compete favorably with the adults at the party levels. The adults, according to this view, are most likely expected to see the actions as threats to their age-long hegemony and attempt to frustrate them by neither providing the resources nor the enabling environments for healthy competition. Thus, the view proffers a solution in which the few accomplished youths are pushed forward as leaders and others provide the needed majority for electoral successes. This category comprises of youths that are well-educated and well-travelled, and professionals, who might constitute themselves into a new critical mass of articulate youth for greater political engagement across West Africa. They are expected to create advocacy opportunities awareness among the youth of all creeds. As more and more of them recognize the demographic advantage that youth have in their respective countries, it would be increasingly difficult to muzzle their voices.

Obviously, the view that the youths are shifting from “zombies” to being agents is critical and worthy of attention. This view is however in its budding stage with a variety of socio-economic factors militating against it. The first is the pervasive poverty among the youth occasioned by widespread unemployment across the West African states. The 16-country West Africa is one of the hardest hit regions by the AIDS pandemic, high youth unemployment rates, environmental degradation, and extreme poverty—Nigeria: 28%; Benin: 40%; Sierra Leone and Ghana: 21%. On average, people living below the poverty line across the region stand at about 60% and the region is the region with the highest
food insecurity levels and malnutrition (World Bank, 2012). Coming therefore from the weak pedestal and competing with potentially strong opposition, it appears that this view will collapse if the youth cannot muster the resources to rise up to the occasion. The second factor is the predictable attitude of the adult to hold on to power as the incumbent and ready to deploy the apparatuses of the states within their disposal to crush any perceived dissent as well as some collateral incidences that will put the youths in disarray. Prominent among these is the phenomenon of human trafficking that target mainly the youths in their budding stages. The United Nations Office on Drug and Crime (UNODC, 2006) reports that a good number of youths are trafficked from their homelands in various parts of West Africa to various parts of the world. In all, the agency of the youth, although visible and developing in the region, is still grappling with challenges posed by the adults from whom the powers are being wrested.

Discussion: ECOWAS as Facilitator of Youth Integration in West Africa

The effort of supranational bodies in bridging the huge gap that currently exists between the youth and their adults cannot be overemphasized. Although, the original mandate of ECOWAS when the Treaty of Lagos was signed on 28 May 1975 was to foster economic and socio-cultural cooperation and integration, the mandate was however revised in 1993 to include political cooperation on the realization that politics is, in fact, the crucial driver of national and sub-regional economic development (ECOWAS, 1975). This shift, in part, derived from the successes scored by ECOWAS in the management and resolution of the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone. As a first step, the Community adopted the ECOWAS’ Declaration of Political Principles by Member States in Abuja, in 1991, committing member states to upholding the highest standards of human rights, freedom, and democratization as critical tool for achieving stability, peace, and regional security. This protocol was preceded by two others relating to defense: the Protocol of non-Aggression of 1978 and the “Protocol Relating to Mutual Assistance of Defence” of 1981 (ECOWAS, 1990). According to the former, ECOWAS was mandated to intervene within the national borders of its member countries in the event of the outbreak of armed conflict that might threaten the peace in the region. It was on this authority that ECOWAS created a jointly coordinated troops mobilization and deployment framework, the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), in 1990 to respond to the outbreak of civil war in Liberia. To date, ECOWAS has thus led to ECOMOG’s peace operations in Liberia from 1990 to 1997, in Sierra Leone from 1997 to 2000, in Guinea-Bissau from 1998 to 1999, and in Côte d’Ivoire from 2002 to 2004 (ECOWAS, 2008).

The dearth of democratic values leading to evident armed struggles in the sub-region inclined ECOWAS at its 25th Conference of Assembly of Heads of State and Government in Dakar in 2001, to adopt the Protocol A/SP1/12/01 on Democracy and Good Governance supplementary to the Protocol establishing the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security. The ECOWAS Protocol has been put into effect on number of occasions. This protocol on democracy and good governance insists on “zero tolerance” to undemocratic processes by the political leaders. It was on the basis of the Protocol, for instance, that ECOWAS imposed sanctions on Togo in February 2005 as a result of the unconstitutional imposition of Faure Eyadéma, the son of Gnassingbe Eyadéma, as president after his father’s demise. The protocol was also put into effect in May 2006 with the deployment of a fact-finding mission to assess security, social, humanitarian, and political conditions in Guinea-Bissau. Similar missions were sent to Gambia in August 2006, Guinea in February 2007, and Nigeria in April 2007, and have been engaging Mali since the botched attempt by deposed President Tandja, who led Niger until 2010, to perpetuate himself in power.

However, although ECOWAS protocols on political and governance issues have been recognized as yielding success, there appears no provision for proper integration of the youth into the political systems of the countries. For instance, the only passive mentions of “youth” in the Articles of ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF) have nothing to do with political matters. Articles 85 to 88 on “Youth Empowerment” in itself may not guarantee the cessation of the continued marginalization of the youths in politics. For the most part, the Articles bordered on infrastructural and social development. The fact that the framework does not address the proper integration of youth into mainstream politics is reflected in the main provision for Youth Empowerment. Article 85 of the ECPF (2008) provides that

The aim of Youth Empowerment is to realize the goals of the relevant provisions of the Revised ECOWAS Treaty and the Mechanism, and in particular Articles 41 - 43 of the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance.

However, the said Articles 41 to 43 of the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance states as follows:

**Article 41:** (1) Member states shall guarantee children’s rights and give them access to basic education. (2) Special laws shall be enacted in each member state and at the level of the community against child trafficking and child prostitution. (3) The community shall adopt laws and regulations on child labour in line with the provisions of the International Labour Organization (ILO).

**Article 42:** (1) Member states shall agree on rules to be adopted on the training and development of the youth. (2) Uniform laws shall be adopted within the Community to prevent and handle cases of juvenile delinquency.
Article 43: The Executive Secretariat shall put in place all necessary structures within its establishment to ensure the effective implementation of common policies and programmes relating to the education and the promotion of the welfare of women and youth.

From the above, there is no practical provision to guarantee participation of youths in the political activities of the member states. For instance, the key issues relating to the enthronement of internal democracy within political parties, which can protect the youths whose bulge can guarantee them victories, are not addressed. As political parties, internal democracy can go a long way to enhance democratic space and ensure that the internal processes of political parties produce political leaders acceptable to the majority electorates.

Conclusion

Solution to youth emancipation in West Africa appears to lie in allowing democracy to flourish so as to gradually turn the advantage of number, which the youth possess, to actual strength. However, addressing the agency of the youth in Africa is more complicated than most of the actors are willing to admit. The adults are in power side-by-side with weak youth who appear to be struggling to exert their influence on the polity. It really appears like asking a pugilist to hit himself when his victory is certain. In the real sense, the only strength for the youth is the huge number, which is certainly not enough to cause a fundamental change in the bastion of power and economic control in the region. From all indications, there is the need for more allowance for monitoring the political and economic equation by supranational and international bodies. Happenings in these states necessitate that international bodies be closely monitored to ensure that the basic tenets of democracy are not glossed over. The ECOWAS has to advocate and enforce the rule of law to create enabling political environment for youths. Any act of undemocratic change of government or tenure elongation must be condemned and the perpetrators be called to question even after leaving office. A case in point is the attempted tenure elongation from the stipulated 8 years to 12 in Nigeria by the Obasanjo Administration between 1999 and 2007. For one, the attitude with which the botched constitutional amendment was attempted stands condemnable on the side of ultra vires. Section 2(2) 1999 Constitution states that “Nigeria shall be a Federation consisting of states and a Federal Capital Territory.” The federating units therefore remain the states. Thus, carrying out the amendment in six geo-political zones was clearly unknown to the 1999 Constitution of Nigeria. There have also been cases of victimization, harassment, incarceration, and even extra-judicial murder of vociferous opposition element across the sub-region, both within the mainstream parties and outside on which the ECOWAS has not taken far-reaching actions. Yet, it is only within the context of healthy opposition that genuine democracy can blossom and bring the much-desired democratic dividend for the youths of West Africa.

In all, the reasons why ECOWAS military and political missions must be improved are not far-fetched. Apart from the fact that the youth, whose growing lives are truncated, are usually the most hit in the event of breakdown of law and order; they are usually the ones utilized by the leaders of militias to prosecute the wars. However, the organization’s initial mandate to foster economic and socio-cultural cooperation and integration of youths can only be achieved by actively ensuring that democratic values are entrenched in party primaries and general elections.

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1. The 2009 figures are the lowest being 30% in Senegal, 60% in Sierra Leone, 70% in Nigeria, and 80% in Liberia; see http://www.ilo.int/public/english/employment/yen/downloads/psi/psi_study.pdf.

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