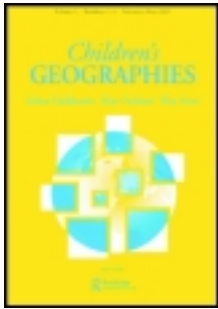


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Youth gangs and street children: culture, nurture and masculinity in Ethiopia

Roy Huijsmans^a

^a International Institute of Social Studies (ISS), The Hague, The Netherlands

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BOOK REVIEW

Youth gangs and street children: culture, nurture and masculinity in Ethiopia, by Paula Heinonen, New York, Oxford: Berghahn, 2013 (paperback), 2011 (hardback), 180 pp., \$99.00/£60.00 (hardback)/\$25.00/£15.50 (paperback), ISBN 978 0 85745 098 2 (hardback)/978 1 78238 132 7 (paperback)

With *Youth Gangs & Street Children* Paula Heinonen has written a remarkable book that deserves a wide readership. It is based on six years of ethnographic research (1995–2001) in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, conducted whilst Heinonen was based at the University of Addis Ababa, complemented with various snippets of data from the years after.

The book differs from much of what has been written about young people on the street in that it brings together research with ‘home-living street children’ and their families, groups of homeless street-living boys and youth (*borcos*), and unemployed youth (*bozene*) who spend most their time in the street. Heinonen shows that it is not so much age that sets these groups apart but rather their appearance, styles, and activities. In addition, she shows that these categories are relational constructs. The *bozene*, for example, refer to the *borcos* to identify themselves.

The book’s central argument is based on the weaving together of rich individual biographies and wider social forces. Heinonen argues that her research subjects are certainly despised by the mainstream Ethiopian society; yet they have not rejected its norms and values. She demonstrates that these wider sets of ideas inform the sociality among and between these different categories of young people on the street, even though their poverty, and the abuse meted out on them more often than not, leads them to act outside of these norms.

In narrating the young people’s biographies there is ample attention to the wider political economy. We also encounter the police, non-governmental organisations, charities, informal associations, adult beggars, local officials (*kebele*), other street workers, and alms givers and patrons. Although I consider this a strength, more attention to young people’s interactions with these other (adult) actors would have situated the analysis in the everyday political society of Addis Ababa more firmly and illuminated its generational dynamics.

A key strength of the book is its temporal scope. Following a group of children and young people intensively for six years (‘almost daily contact’, p. 14), means that the very subject of research changes. As Heinonen puts it: ‘the vulnerable pre-teen street boys I knew entered puberty as sexually active teenagers, right before my eyes’ (p. 2). Capturing this longer *durée* sheds light on trajectories of street life. This includes youth moving into, out of, and between gangs, home-living street children breaking with their families, as well as various ways in which these young people entered some form of adulthood; be it by serving sentence in prison, entering international migration, joining the army or religious sects, or setting up their own households; whilst others disappeared from sight often under worrying circumstances.

The book is organised into five chapters complemented with a useful introduction and a short conclusion. The first of these five chapters introduces the Ethiopian context, covering some general ground and issues particular to the urban poor in Addis Ababa. Next is a theoretical chapter that sets out a key conceptual notion (*yilunta*) that ties much of the analysis together. *Yilunta* is described as ‘having a deeper sense of shame in personally knowing that one has done something shameful regardless of what people may think or say or even whether anyone knows about it’ (p. 32). Heinonen elaborates on children’s socialisation into *yilunta* and its gendered dimensions. The latter she deepens through the notion of (hegemonic) masculinity. The

other key theoretical notion, ‘sociality theory’ drawing on the work of Michael Carrithers, does not receive specific attention in the theory chapter, yet informs the analysis presented in subsequent chapters.

Next are the three main and much longer chapters; one on home-living street children and their families, and two on groups of street youth. These are largely self-contained discussions and stand out for their empirical richness. Despite having conducted research in 52 homes and with more than 200 children and adults, in her presentation Heinonen opts for depth over breadth and bases the chapter on home-living street children on a fine-grained description of two households; one female-headed household (Lemlem’s household), and one figuring a husband (Mulu’s household). The chapter unravels the interplay between the gender and generational dynamics of street work and the many challenges of social reproduction in poor urban households. Furthermore, the attention to the various informal associations (e.g. burial, rotating credit, and religious), in which the street-working poor often participate alongside other urban poor, is one of the many instances where Heinonen demonstrates how ‘the street’ and its people are not divorced from the wider urban environment and its sociality but form a part of it.

Of the two chapters on ‘youth gangs’, one (over 40 pages) is dedicated to an all-male group of street youth, the Zelalem group, and the other (nearly 20 pages) to a mixed-sex group (Alemu’s group). I put youth gangs in quotation marks since I am not fully sure whether these loose groups view themselves as gangs or that it is Heinonen’s labelling, in which case it remains unclear why she prefers using this term. Also, I would have welcomed further data and analysis on the boys’ ‘leisure activities’. We find the boys frequently referring to ‘a party’ and having ‘a good time’, yet we ultimately learn little about this dimension of their lives. Nonetheless, the chapter on the all-male group is excellent in its analysis of intra-group dynamics (e.g. leadership, reciprocity, the constant tension between individual autonomy and the collective, and violence) and how these homeless youth relate to other social groups on the street, especially their exploitative relation with the *bozene* who constantly extort money from them in the name of ‘protection’, through gambling, or simply by taking it by force. Unfortunately, these themes are not explicitly returned to in the chapter about the mixed-sex group, even though its internal dynamics and situatedness in the wider street environment are clearly very different. Instead, this chapter is partly an ‘afterword’ about the boys that comprised the Zelalem group because all of them joined the mixed-sex group at some point following the disintegration of their own group. In this chapter we also learn more about the lives of homeless girls, especially about the intra-gang sexual violence they were often subject to. The short conclusion chapter reluctantly engages in a ‘policy discussion’, something the book, perhaps, could have done without.

Altogether I would highly recommend this book, and I hope it finds a readership well beyond the narrow disciplinary and geographical confines that scholarship from the south too often ends up in. Finally, the book underscores the value of long term, and fairly open-ended ethnographic research. Clearly, this book could not have been written on the basis of the shorter and ‘focused’ periods of fieldwork that, much due to changes in higher education (funding), have increasingly become the norm in most doctoral and post-doctoral research.

Roy Huijsmans

International Institute of Social Studies (ISS), The Hague, The Netherlands
huijsmans@iss.nl

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