

BOOK REVIEW

Paul Ugor, ed. *Youth Popular Culture in Africa: Media, Music, and Politics*. Rochester: University of Rochester Press., 2021. xi + 405 pp. \$135.00. Cloth. ISBN 978-1-64825-024-8.

Scholarship on popular culture and youth in Africa has increased remarkably in the last two decades. Whether the topic concerns music, art, theater, dance, fiction, or fashion, these genres have been observed, scrutinized, and analyzed by scholars from different disciplines and locations. *Youth Popular Culture in Africa: Media, Music, and Politics*, edited by Paul Ugor, is a welcome addition to this growing body of scholarship. Divided into three parts with fourteen chapters, plus an introduction and an afterword, the book is a good overview of popular culture as it exists in Africa today. The book's few chapters on social media—specifically Instagram and Twitter—not only points to youth participation in Africa's growing social media arena but also highlights the need for academics to take such media seriously if they are to fully understand the expressive culture of African youth today. It is a noticeable deficiency that scholarship on such platforms as WhatsApp is missing, given that these modalities represent such a common mode of social contact and communication across the continent. The book's major argument is captured in this statement: "Despite being in some senses defined by forces beyond their control (Africa's youth) also shape global and local cultural developments especially through the active production and politicization of popular culture" (4–5). Some contributors show that youth go beyond performing popular culture to become active shapers of local social and political cultures.

Part One of the book focuses on media globalization, popular Afro hip hop, and postcolonial political critique, bringing together five chapters linked by music as a medium through which to view how youth influence various aspects of society. From protesting against government processes and failed promises to establishing their own identities, African youth use music to enter into public spaces that were previously inaccessible. The spread and manipulation of popular music by youth to critique and create new ways of living correspond to the neoliberal political-economic changes facing many African nations. Youth engage with the state in ways that allow them to be


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heard and followed. Music accords them a tool for mobilizing sentiments and inviting reflections with political leaders and the larger population. As Ibrahim Bangura notes on Sierra Leone, by using music young people have “succeeded in shaping the conversations and narratives around issues that young people and the general society contend with on a daily basis” (129). This immediacy has made music a powerful social tool for bringing about significant changes, as witnessed in the case of the Senegalese youth movement *y en marre* which confronted political leaders bravely in seeking social justice.

Part Two brings together works on popular online media and democratic engagement, with five chapters centered around such topics as Instagram, fiction writing, and other social media platforms. Although it is unregulated and sometimes ungoverned, social media has brought enormous opportunities for African youth to produce and share cultural products in unprecedented ways. The nature of social media productions is a threat to traditional print media. From offering humor that makes fun of otherwise strict entities such as the police in Nigeria to creatively hosting short works of fiction that draw critiques and commentaries in Ghana, social media presents an Africa unlike the one painted by foreign scholars. Youth create pictures of their contexts that are real or imagined and comment or critique them variably through the social media platforms of their choice. Youth in Zimbabwe respond to political repression through Twitter, as those in Uganda respond to legislated homophobia through popular culture, offering alternative narratives to those of the state. Such push-backs from youth in these different locations reflect what Deborah Durham terms “social shifting,” where social identities and constructions occur in the innovation and resistance mobilized by youth.

Part Three of the book has four chapters on popular arts, everyday life, and the politicization of culture. From youth in Niger adopting Wizkid’s fashion lines to define their public identities, dance trainers in Guinea reminiscing on a “lost generation” of dancers, and Botswana’s popular songs that agitate for social and mental change, to the #FeesMustFall movement in South Africa which resulted in the rethinking of class disparities and enduring legacies of apartheid, these chapters construct youth not as a time bomb waiting to explode but rather as active players and shapers of their own destinies. The arguments made in the volume and the examples shared of various youth making inroads into subjects and products that are popularly accessible and revisable lead to a construction of an Africa that is not only contemporary but also futuristic. African youth are agitated and uncomfortable with the status quo, not as mindless goons for hire, but as thoughtful and caring individuals committed to the transformation of the continent. Nadine Dolby’s Afterword captures the power of personal reflections in articulating the active role youth play in shaping their worlds. She writes, “These youth were not passive receptacles for a cultural world that was imported from global centers but were active agents in both creating and disseminating these cultural worlds” (387). *Youth and Popular Culture in Africa* provides

numerous examples of this point. It is a book that, had the contributors engaged more African authors on the broad area of popular culture, would further enrich the study of African popular culture and youth.

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