



Reinventing Apprenticeship and Rites of Passage

An Entry into the Urban Economy in Sub-Saharan Africa

Most traditional societies in sub-Saharan Africa have developed well-built systems for initiation of young people into the routines, skills and understandings of adult life. These include age-group organizations, initiatory rites of passage, and trade apprenticeship patterns.

Traditional arrangements for apprenticeship and initiation remain strongest in rural communities and are much less in evidence on the urban periphery among those whom hunger, unemployment, or simply the lure of a better life have motivated to move townward. Many ties between the two areas remain, and associations for out-migrants from specific villages and regions are well known in the cities.

A generation left to its own devices

On the whole, however, rural out-migration has contributed materially to breaking down the relevance and strength of initiatory and apprenticeship customs over the years since “flag independence.” The most extreme example of the dissolution of social guarantees for rites of passage probably lies in the situation of street children, those young people without schooling, occupation and often fixed residence who haunt the highways and byways of urban Africa.

United Nations agencies and many NGOs concerned with the issue consider street children as one sub-category of working children — that is, young people below the age of legal or social maturity in their host cultures

who are working in conditions detrimental to their growth and development. Most children in developing societies, it is true, *do and will work*. The challenge is much less one of prohibiting all forms of labor by those under age than it is ensuring that children are not forced into inappropriate and harmful work by the pressures of survival, and that they have opportunities for a positive transition to adult life.

But the plight of street children does throw into relief an important aspect of the situation in the urban periphery that is more than just economic, even if it is solidly rooted in resource deprivation: the lack of socially-sponsored avenues for displaced young people to develop an adult identity. Carbon copies of traditional associations are unlikely to work. As a Hausa proverb puts the matter, “*In rawa ta sake, ki’di ita mai sai ta sake*”: When the beat of the drum changes, the dance step must change as well. What are the new beats that make sense in terms of existing social capital and cultural rhythms, as well as

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the changed conditions that challenge them? Three examples from Africa and one from the Caribbean offer some ideas.

Stemming the tide of street children: the Undugu Society in Kenya

The Undugu Society was established through the efforts of a Dutch priest who moved to Nairobi in 1972 after 17 years of experience in rural Tanzania and who there began a ministry for urban youth. Few young people turned up for his church-based programs, but he observed that the streets of Nairobi were overflowing with unemployed youth, most visibly the city's "parking boys" who sought gratuities from motorists for guarding or washing their cars in Nairobi's crowded central district.

In 1973, the priest began spending most of his time on the streets developing rapport with the boys, talking to them about their daily lives and about their aspirations. He found many of them to be primary school dropouts whose abandonment of school and home had often been because their families could not pay school fees or buy the necessary uniforms

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and materials. Most, as an Undugu "housefather" points out, responded to queries about their needs with "*Nataka kusoma*"—Kiswahili for "I want education."¹

For these reasons, the priest initially decided that efforts in support of the street children should concentrate on getting them back into school, and he set out to find the funds to pay fees and material costs for as many of them as possible. He soon discovered, however, that school directors for the most part could not take the children or did not want them back. They feared by and large that the same factors that had forced these young people out of school the first time would do so again or that the street had worked character changes which would make it impossible for them to conform to standard classroom routine.

A learning process

This first reversal was followed by a series of new departures, failed initiatives and learning experiences that led the Undugu Society to gradually develop an innovative and progressively more successful approach to the situation of deprived youth in Nairobi. That model had four clear steps. The first was a network of "informal schools" located in slum communities in and around Nairobi. They targeted boys and girls aged 10-16 who had not entered or been able to stay in primary school and were thus at risk of becoming street and working children, if they had not already done so. The program was designed to last three years, give participants basic literacy and survival skills plus a heightened sense of their own self-worth, and allow those who wished, to return to formal education or move into vocational training.

This initiation to formal education or appropriate vocational skills constituted phase two of the process and occupied an additional year. Those who remained in the program—or returned to it after a period in formal schooling—had an opportunity to experiment with trades that were prominent in Nairobi's informal economy and for which Undugu possessed adequate workshop facilities: principally carpentry, tailoring, auto mechanics and metalworking.

Finding a place in society

The third phase involved transition to employment and adult economic roles. Young people who had developed a trade preference were assisted in identifying an informal-sector artisan

with whom they might apprentice for a year in order to gain further training and experience. Undugu was partner to this negotiation and developed certain criteria for the selection of “host” artisans as well as a procedure for periodic inspection of their facilities to help ensure that the apprentices were being trained and that working conditions were not exploitative. During this year of apprenticeship, the young people involved come in weekly to the workshops at Undugu headquarters for “skill upgrading.” This consisted of targeted training with equipment and on technical skills that most local artisans could not offer, training designed at the same time to prepare them to take the first government trade test in their vocational area at the end of the year.

Placement of Undugu trade graduates in jobs or, more frequently, in situations of profitable self-employment in the informal sector was the final and fourth phase. Undugu’s Business Advisory Unit provides business training and loans to the program’s graduates in order to help them set themselves up in their trade. The Society has also established an Industrial Design department to work on improving the design and marketing of goods and services produced by the informal sector, and specifically in the trades that Undugu supports and by the artisans with whom apprentices have been placed. Staff of the industrial design unit hold workshops for the informal sector artisans who are collaborating with Undugu on the design and marketing of their products, in effect using Undugu apprentices as a vector or vehicle for progressive technical upgrading of informal sector production.

A variety of other approaches

The SKI Courier Service in Khartoum. A different but related approach has been taken by the non-governmental organization (NGO) Street Kids International in its work in Khartoum, Sudan. The problem of how to secure for these young people an insertion into urban society and the urban economy led the organization’s staff and the young people themselves to reflect on the “comparative advantage” that street children might have on the urban market. One of their skills is that they do in fact know the streets—i.e. the highways and byways of a conurbation like Khartoum—and are able to handle themselves effectively in what others might find to be an intimidating environment. Staff and street children put this fact up against what economists call current “rigidities” in the urban economy, and in particular the difficulty of getting important

packages and materials from one side to another of Khartoum’s sprawling traffic jams. And they came up with the idea of a Street Children Courier Service.

As developed, this initiative involved

- procuring bicycles for the cadre of couriers, which each child could then reimburse from their work proceeds
- training the children in the delivery scheme and appropriate safety measures
- helping them to establish the central organization and accounting measures that would make the activity feasible.

It was, in fact, a considerable success; and the model was replicated with good effect by SKI in Bangalore, India a few years later.

Artisans’ Associations in Senegal (ENDA/GRAF). Initiatives supported by ENDA (Environment and Development) Third World in the urban area of Dakar, Senegal, started in a sense at the other end of the stick. ENDA staff were involved in helping informal sector artisans — in carpentry, leather working and beverage manufacturing — to form their own associations in the interests of upgrading their technology and resolving common problems of supply and marketing. Each activity began, however, with a thorough “reconnaissance” of the local environment. It is ENDA’s practice, and particularly the habit of its action research unit (*Groupe recherche-action-formation* or “GRAF”), to base all local development work in urban slums upon action research carried out with the beneficiaries. One of the prime issues identified in this exercise by the artisans themselves was the situation of the numerous out-of-school youth on foot in their neighborhoods.

As a consequence, the associations resolved to create their own apprenticeship system to provide avenues for socialization into the workplace and adult life for these young people. The Carpenters’ Cooperative was the most active in this regard and has developed a system for rotating the out-of-school youth whom it adopts as apprentices among a series of master craftsmen to learn different aspects of their trade and then — with ENDA/GRAF’s help — initiating them as well into accounting and management for small business.

SERVOL in Trinidad. A final example of note is taken from a location well off the African continent, but linked to it in numerous historical and cultural ways: the island of Trinidad in

the West Indies. Problems of youth-adult transition in urban environments are every bit as pronounced there as in the three cases just examined – and in a sense, the origins of one of the best known programs that has sought to deal with them, SERVOL (“Service Volunteered for All”), were similar as well. Like the Undugu Society, SERVOL was founded by a Catholic priest concerned with deteriorating conditions for youth in the city. Like Undugu, it has grown into an organization that offers not just employment but alternate paths of socialization into adult life for its charges. Prime among these are the SERVOL “Life Centres.”

As the name implies, the Life Centres are much more than vocational training facilities. To begin with, they are built by their adolescent members to house workshops, classrooms and community facilities. Each serves as a preschool center as well, and all participants must take some responsibility for the infants. Then, too, a major emphasis is on peer counseling and opportunities for young people to talk through the varied social and emotional challenges they face, in a context imbued with values from the island’s three religious traditions: Christian, Muslim and Hindu. The young people participate in development of their own “SPICES” curriculum: Spiritual, Physical, Intellectual, Cultural and Emotional savvy. From there, participants may move into vocational training and employment or qualify for modest loan funds to start as entrepreneurs on their own. The program drop-out rate is only 5 percent, the post-training employment or successful self-employment rate over 75 percent.

Essential ingredients: employment, meaning and self-direction

All these examples represent efforts to fill the void in apprenticeship of adult roles for impoverished young people thrown out of a traditional framework and into the vortex of African cities. And they seem to succeed best where they manage to “recreate tradition”, infusing the customary categories of apprentice and age-group association with new economic direction and increased self-direction and definition by the participants.

A few other lessons emerge from this rapid overview of efforts to assist Africa’s impoverished youth in building new identities:

- An “adult education” approach works best, insofar as it involves building on the experience and skills that young people already have and giving them a determining role in guiding the program.
- Gainful and meaningful employment is a cornerstone of new identities, but not the cement. That is provided by a vision of the future—whether religious, cultural or political—and the opportunity to apply it to one’s own life. Peer counseling is thus a frequent element of successful programs.
- Traditional forms of apprenticeship and youth association should be used as repertoire and resource, but also be critiqued. Such programs are typically a crucible for many neighboring cultures.
- Discovery of one’s environment — and advocacy for change — are critical complements to any effort.

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