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Youth Culture, State Collapse and Nation Building in West Africa: the nexus revisited

Youth culture is an important element of subculture that draws on the notion of culture as learned behaviour. It refers to a collective identity, a reference group, from which to develop an individual identity. Extant literature on youth culture in West Africa have tended to see the emergence of a negative youth culture as a necessary precursor to state collapse especially in the Mano River area. On the one hand, Kaplan's sociological thesis sees youth and youth culture in Sierra Leone as 'loose molecules of society' that condition the retreat from 'modernity' and heralds the return to Hobbesian state of nature. And on the other, others (Ibrahim Abdullah 1998; Ismail Rashid 1997, 2000) using historical materialism, equate youth culture with a *Lumpen* philosophy (emerging from capitalist transformation) that is anti-social, anti-establishment and revolutionary in orientation, a factor that explains why children and youth bear arms. Still, the third perspective (McIntyre, Aning and Addo 2002) looks at the emergence of a rebellious youth culture in the context of the breakdown of 'constructive social incentives' that contribute to stability and orderly change in the society. Such damaged social incentives, it is argued, explains the implosion of states.

A noticeable least common denominator across the contending perspective is the view that (negative) youth culture is central to the understanding of state collapse (and by extension, the problems of nation building in West Africa) expressed in terms of rebel movements and internecine, uncivil wars. However, this paper contends otherwise: that (a negative) youth culture is a casualty as well as a consequence rather than a cause of state collapse. It argues that: first, (negative) youth culture does not account for, or explain, the emergence of rebel movements. The crystallization of opposition to the incumbents of powers into armed rebellion is to be understood in a wider socio-political and economic context. Second, though youth culture is viewed as hedonistic and rebellious in nature, this however, must be correctly discerned in socio-cultural terms rather than the political. The limited educational and economic opportunities identified as facilitators of a negative youth culture are characteristic of many societies across Africa. After all, what the *lumpen proletariats*, *rare boys*, *San San Boys*, and *Savis-man* exhibit in Sierra Leone is astonishingly similar to the 'Area Boys' in Nigeria. Were the emergence of a negative youth culture a necessary harbinger of state collapse, Africa would have accounted for more than 19 of the 56 most violent armed conflict in the world.

Third and most importantly, youth culture is actually damaged and becomes negative in the context of uncivil wars; youth are socialized into a culture of unrestrained, indiscriminate violence and the social catharsis (taboos) mediate sanity is shattered. To characterize the pre-war youth culture as negative and central to state collapse is to be oblivious of the underlining nature of youth culture as a provider of cognitive materials from which to develop an alternative career, kept secret from, in rebellion with, the adult world. The paper posits that youth culture is a central component of state building in West Africa. To realize this, there is a need for widespread use of national youth service scheme (beyond Nigeria and Ghana) to repair damaged youth culture in war and post-war societies, as well as to inculcate democratic ethos and re-awaken the spirit of positive nationalism in youth in non-war societies.