

Heinonen, Paula. 2011. *Youth Gangs and Street Children. Culture, Nurture and Masculinity in Ethiopia*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books. 186 pp. Hb: \$70.00 / £42.00. ISBN: 9780857450982.

Paula Heinonen's *Youth Gangs and Street Children* distils Paula Heinonen's six years' (1995–2001) of fieldwork in the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa. The monograph explores the gendered world order of Ethiopian culture, childhood and *streetism*, the term for a way of life bound by its own set of rules for children who work and/or live on the streets. Heinonen argues that this term addresses cultural issues specific to Ethiopian street children. She challenges the general assumption that street children operate outside an adult framework by drawing attention to children in Ethiopia who have a meaningful adult presence in their lives despite the street being their main source of socialisation and economic activity. The author provides ethnographic examples to demonstrate that these children are indeed still very much connected to their poverty-ridden parents and particularly their mothers. She also chronicles what happens when no adult guidance is in place, as in the case of the youth gangs she follows over the course of several years. These children (*borcos*) have severed ties with their families for good, using domestic physical or sexual abuse as justification, and they are often too ashamed to return home. Heinonen argues that it is exactly this culturally constructed sense of shame and pride or *yilunta* in Amharic (although it has equivalents in most Ethiopian languages) that is at the core of all societal undertakings and extends into the lives of street children.

The book offers a good sense of the current socio-political system in Ethiopia, with its numerous political changes, and the specific impact of communism on the development of governmental structures. From the point of view of streetism, especially enlightening is the discussion of the *kebele* system, which offers housing at rent-controlled prices to selected members while leaving those outside the system without even a government issued identity card. Given the large influx of migrants from the countryside, where most Ethiopians still reside, into Addis Ababa, the consequence has been housing shortages and hordes of unregistered people in the capital, fuelling streetism kind of life.

The author shows that the patriarchal world order offers an essential code of conduct for the street children, who are inculcated into the same belief system as the rest of the Ethiopian society. Keeping up appearances and saving face is important for adults and children alike. In the case of boys, there is a strong emphasis on the ritual affirmation of their maleness, which leads to both physical and sexual violence, including child-to-child rape, one of the most sensitive topics of the book. In the case of girls, their femaleness is affirmed by acting as docile and obedient daughters to their parents or as "wives" to the gang members, but, as the author shows, not all girls and women confirm to this, which in turn results in gender-based violence, both physical and sexual. Disciplining children both at home and in school, takes form of a corporal punishment and often equals child-abuse, but is not portrayed as solely the problem of the impoverished, as even the street children from wealthier backgrounds in her sample had left home because of severe abuse.

All in all, it is the combination of the cultural (*yilunta* and the patriarchal world view) and the socio-historic (the peculiar housing and registration system that extends

into the fields of health and education) that the author argues are among the main causes for the never-ending cycle of abuse and poverty that lead children to streetism. Throughout the book, Heinonen points out that neither the state nor the non-governmental sector provides adequate support for those living and/or working on the streets. Despite popular conceptions, the author insists that street children, including members of youth gangs, are not criminals, but rather they represent the failures of a system that perpetuates poverty and inequality. She is vehement that being part of a gang does not necessarily lead to a criminal future, but rather a destitute one.

Youth Gangs and Street Children is a well-researched and insightful monograph. The author's relatively long period of field work enables her to follow-up on the longer term fates of the informants. Heinonen has taken great care to gather and categorise her data and to distil it down to its essence. It is not, however, the kind of book that provides copious amounts of ethnographic data from which readers can draw their own conclusions. The analysis does have a personal and at times emotional tone to it, but it is nonetheless well-reasoned and investigative. Moreover, there is none of the cultural relativism that is present in much of the anthropological work on children. Childhood is presented as a universal concept, albeit culturally mediated, in the tradition of the 20th century children's rights movement in which children are primarily perceived as victims. This renders the monograph a rich source for those interested in children's rights. Although there is a detailed methodology section, more reflection on how the author may have been perceived by her informants (as, for example, a native, a foreigner, a friend, a mother-figure) would have allowed readers to better evaluate her working relationship with those informants. The book does provide a great deal of insight into the complicated ways in which urban poverty is perpetuated in the developing world. However, more analysis of the impact of political instability and regime change would be helpful. The reflection on the differences between the street children who have meaningful ties to their families and those who do not, is certainly a powerful and enlightening aspect of the book.

Finally, the monograph serves as an abundant source for those interested in gender, especially for understanding the real-life strategies employed by Ethiopian women and children to survive in a predominantly patriarchal society, and especially for following the way maleness is constructed.

Karina Vasilevska-Das
Riga Stradins University (Latvia)