The Transnational Youth Empowerment Paradox: African Youth Leadership and Movement Capture

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"To tell you the truth, I think I'm really done with the 'leadership marker' thing," Ajibola mused midway through our 2018 Skype interview.[1] I had known Ajibola for seven years at that point after meeting him when he was an undergraduate at the University of Ibadan, where I conducted ethnographic fieldwork between 2006 and 2012 for my dissertation on student politics after the "democratic" transition in Nigeria (Strong 2016). In 2018, Ajibola was completing a master's in South Africa through the Mandela Rhodes Scholarship, which funds graduate study for African youth who "have already assumed leadership and made an impact" (The Mandela Rhodes Foundation, n.d.). At least a dozen Nigerian students I had developed relationships with had similarly pursued "youth leadership" opportunities in South Africa, North America, and Europe after graduation. I was interviewing Ajibola as part of the African Youth Leadership Study, then an exploratory project to understand this seeming upsurge in leadership pursuits. Continuing his reflection, Ajibola cautioned, "This 'leadership pipeline' thing—I'm beginning to suspect how vacuous it is, you know?" Here, Ajibola articulates what I have come to question about youth leadership development in Africa, which represents one node within what we might call the Transnational Youth Empowerment Complex.

Tracking African Youth Leadership

Over the past five years, I have investigated the global proliferation and institutionalization of African youth leadership development with a team of student collaborators, using interviews, ethnographic observation and fieldwork, qualitative surveys, digital mapping, and a research website (africanyouthleadershipstudy.com). In the first completed phase of this inquiry, my research team and I mapped the leadership development landscape and examined how programs define their purpose and pedagogy. We collected and analyzed organizational data on nearly three hundred initiatives that target African youth, offer educational training, and promise to cultivate a "new generation of leaders" that will accelerate African development. In the second, ongoing phase, which seeks to understand youth experiences of organized leadership development, 240 youth leaders from twenty-four African countries have participated in the study through forty-nine individual interviews, two focus groups, and 229 survey responses. In this article, I sketch the contradictions in these emerging formations of "global youth empowerment," engaging the critical observations of Ajibola, a key interlocutor and collaborator in the larger study, which bring into relief the de-radicalizing effects of institutionalized youth leadership development.
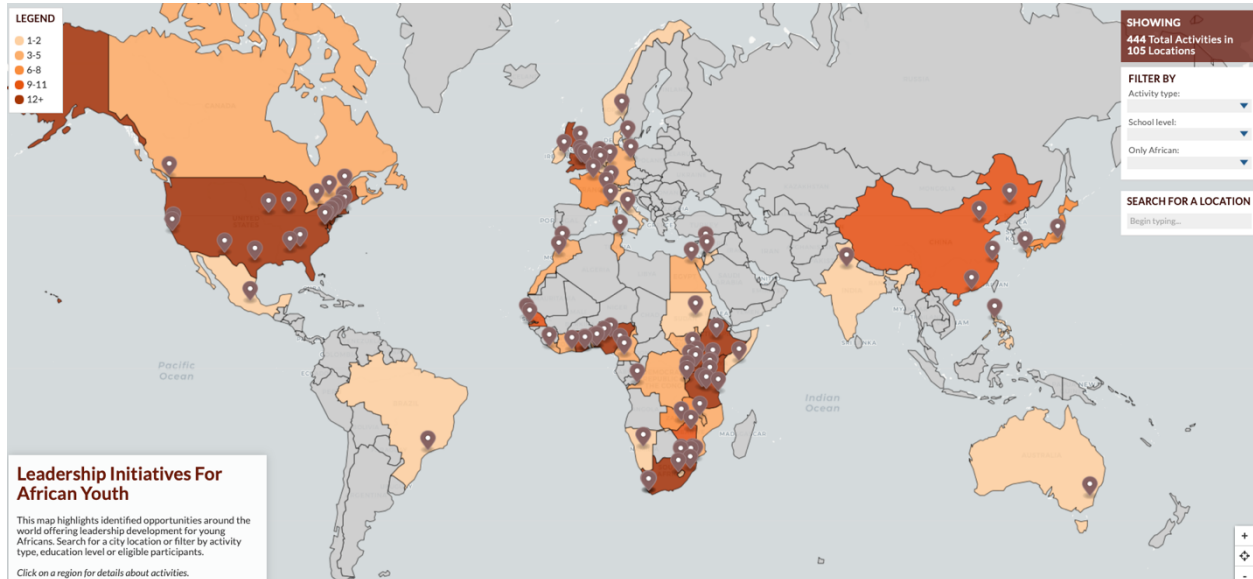
Figure 1. A Digital Map of African Youth Leadership Development Initiatives[2]

Contradictions in Institutionalized Leadership Development

In tracking hundreds of African youth leadership initiatives, this study has identified a global ecosystem—encompassing governments; multilateral, non-governmental, corporate, and philanthropic institutions; and public and private actors—that has invested billions of dollars in grooming a new leadership class in Africa over the past decade. These concerted efforts are part of the broader "positive youth development movement," which has shifted research, policy, and practice from pathologizing views of youth as "problems to be managed" (Roth et al. 1998) to a "strength-based vision and vocabulary" (Lerner et al. 2009). As critical scholars have noted, positive youth development tends to "take at face value" the idea that global youth interventions are "new, progressive, and empowering" for youth (Sukarieh and Tannock 2008, 302).
On the contrary, Ajibola discerned that youth leadership development seems to compound political and class divisions among African youth:

> AJIBOLA: So, a lot of these leadership programs are usually looking for, okay, what organization did you found? Where did you school, you know? That sort of thing. So basically, when you have this leadership pipeline, you find a lot of people who are versed in leadership…Then you get, on the other hand, people who really worked it, who send their own sister or siblings to school. Now, these ones don't have the chance to maybe start the right life project, you know. Fancy projects. I mean, for them it's *really* leadership, if you get what I'm saying.

> KRYSTAL: I think so. It sounds like you're making a distinction between people who are a part of this formal leadership pipeline. They go to these leadership programs. They have the language. They have the training. They have been recognized as these "leaders" in the making. But then it sounds like you're saying there are other people who are doing the work of leadership, who may not have the language.

AJIBOLA: That's exactly what I'm saying. When I look at the people who, after one fellowship, they get another fellowship, I realize a lot of them came from the pipeline…Whereas, for example, there was a scholar who didn't [apply for a leadership] fellowship because he was having problems at the university because of the fact that he was a [protest] leader. So, there were consequences attached to it, whereas there were a lot of incentives to keeping to the pipeline.

KRYSTAL: It sounds like you're saying that there are rewards for people who are a part of this pipeline. That you sort of go from fellowship to fellowship, but you may not be taking the kind of risks that some of the other folks who don't have this kind of formal recognition are.

AJIBOLA: Exactly.

In distinguishing between youth who are *versed* in leadership and those who either lack the *right* life project or face *consequences* for activism, Ajibola outlines the ways the formalized leadership pipeline delegitimizes the political tactics of youth when they do not fit neatly into the boxes of respectability and civility. This observation aligns with preliminary findings from program, interview, and focus group data, which suggest a pattern of elite reproduction that incentivizes youth to "keep to the pipeline," as Ajibola phrases it. Most of the programs we have identified, especially the most resourced, are prohibitively selective and only accept youth with demonstrated "potential." As a result, most successful candidates, including those who participated in this study, have years of accumulated advantages in educational access and social capital over peers in terms of qualifications, documented leadership, and other accolades.

The De-radicalization of "Empowered" Youth

The current role of education in the formation of African leaders follows a historical pattern of development dating back centuries. Imperial education was vital in establishing a native educated elite, and, after World War II, the transfer of power to this "new petty bourgeoisie" largely preserved colonial power structures (Zeilig 2007). In interviews, several youth leaders noted, with a measure of frustration, how programs' connections to foreign donors reinforced global power systems, which require youth to leave Africa to receive desired training or personal development. 78% of the programs we analyzed are sponsored by institutions with headquarters outside of Africa or require travel abroad (Strong and Kallon Kelly, forthcoming). Thus, if the historical pattern applies, it is likely that current formations of youth leadership development will replace the existing ruling class with a new elite without fundamentally transforming power structures or material realities. In our contemporary moment, when youth in Africa—and around the world—are rising against the political establishment (Strong 2018), it is unclear whether privileged "leaders" perceived as being handpicked by foreign countries will have legitimacy.

Sukarieh and Tannock (2011) warn that "positive youth development—along with its associated set of concepts of youth participation, leadership, organizing and activism" is often mobilized to "present a facade of engagement with radical, oppositional, grassroots politics" (685). For instance, after the October 2020 youth-led #EndSARS protests against police brutality in Nigeria, the Ford Foundation created the "Nigeria Youth Futures Fund," promising to raise $15

million to "increase leadership capacity, enhance educational opportunities, and build relationships between youth leaders and regional governments" (Ford Foundation 2021). Though this might appear to "build on momentum in the region inspired by the youth-led #EndSARS movement," scholars have shown that, more often, the influx of foundation dollars has the opposite effect.[3] Francis's (2019) theorization of "movement capture" in relationship to the de-radicalization of U.S. civil rights organizations illustrates "the power asymmetries embedded in the relationship between community organizations… and funding from NGO's and businesses" through which funders "exploit their elevated financial position by linking provision of funds to the pursuit of new goals or by shifting the salience of existing agenda issues" (278). Similarly, Kwon (2013) conceptualizes this non-profit "capture" of radical activism as "affirmative governmentality," which works by "empowering traditionally marginalized populations such as 'at-risk' youth of color" to "act on their own behalf, but not necessarily to oppose the relations of power that made them powerless" (11).

As an assemblage of interventions and investments that explicitly intend to shift power in Africa, African youth leadership development exists within these global power dynamics and the threat of establishment co-optation and de-radicalization. In centering the political analysis of Ajibola, a young leader who entered and then voluntarily divested from this growing leadership pipeline, this article lends a critical perspective to the celebratory discourse on the "positive" impact of youth empowerment through leadership development. My analysis urges caution: as non-profit movement capture converges with the Transnational Youth Empowerment Complex, it is imperative to keep in focus how this kind of "development" has historically functioned as an "anti-politics machine," "depoliticizing everything it touches, everywhere whisking political realities out of sight" (Ferguson 1994, xv). If institutionalized youth leadership development promises social change, we must ask: in whose interests and for whose benefit?

Endnotes

[1] At the wishes of my longtime interlocutor, Ajibola Adigun, I do not use a pseudonym in this article. Ajibola is both a member of the research population—young African leaders—and a budding researcher who joined my research team after participating in the study. In a collaborative relationship such as this, I view the use of Ajibola's real identity as a form of reciprocity, which reflects growing calls to unsettle the "false dichotomy between the field and academia" that assumes "the academic currencies of recognition […] and intellectual credit are not relevant to our interlocutors" (Weiss 2021, para. 14).

[2] This interactive map was created and is maintained by my research team. The map and its corresponding data are publicly available at the study's research website (www.africanyouthleadershipstudy.com/map).

[3] Relatedly, after the murder of George Floyd in May 2020, America's fifty biggest companies and their foundations pledged at least $50 billion to address racial inequality in one year alone (Jan et al. 2021).

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