CHAPTER 19

Street youth as human billboards – a paradox of performed street citizenship

Novel political participation by street youth in Ghana

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Attaining the right to vote is a key moment in the transition to adulthood, the 'coming-of-age' (Wall, 2014). The ability to participate in elections, and the desire to do so, is symbolic of the democratic exchange between state and individual – an expression of participation, inclusion and democracy (Adu-Gyamfi, 2014; Parvin, 2018). The provision of citizenship is not purely administrative; it can be emotionally and politically charged – a statement of intent by governments to exclude certain individuals, ethnic groups or those deemed as 'other' (Di Gregorio and Merolli, 2016). The denial of citizenship has often been used as a tool to disenfranchise and exclude ethnic groups; for example, citizenship of the United States of America (USA) was not conferred

DOI: 10.4324/9781003341666-22

upon Native Americans until 1924 (Stanciu, 2021), and Rohingya Muslims are still denied citizenship in Myanmar (Yusuf et al., 2019). Financial and legal barriers can preclude refugees from citizenship, sometimes for generations (van Blerk et al., 2022). Individuals' affective citizenship, the embodied nature of national identity and its social performance (Fortier, 2016: 1039) must all be acknowledged, as citizenship recognition validates and endorses our identity and our sense of belonging, and exclusion has emotive ramifications beyond deprivation from participation in state apparatus.

Key to the right to vote is possession of identity documentation (ID), typically birth registration and certification, which evidences a person's name, age, family and nationality (van Blerk et al., 2020). This can protect young people from exploitation and also enable their participation as citizens (UNICEF, 2020). However, many countries face challenges in registering all births and providing birth certification; gender disparities, poverty and geographical remoteness can exacerbate limited registration governance (Selim, 2019).

This chapter focuses on one group whose affective citizenship is challenged by lack of ID, who could be defined as 'in principle citizens' (Hunter, 2019: 268). Having a right to citizenship due to birth, nationality and cultural belonging (Gyekye-Jandoh, 2016), the legal right to vote of 'in principle' citizens is subject to passive official denial due to their overriding status as young, socially marginalised and poor (Parvin, 2018). This experience, shared across many contexts, is illustrated by the lived experience of the case study author (Lamptey), a Ghanaian citizen who is unable to vote due to lack of ID.

Ghana is in West Africa, geo-politically positioned in 'sub-Saharan Africa', a term that has been critiqued and problematised (see, for example, Ekwe-Ekwe, 2012), but frequently used as a grouping of countries for statistical purposes. Globally, the births of a quarter of the world's children, 168 million people, are not registered, with more than half of these (96 million) living in sub-Saharan Africa (Selim, 2019; UNICEF, 2020), with 1.4 billion births predicted between 2020 and 2050 (UNDESA, 2019). As a region, sub-Saharan Africa is one of the poorest in the world, with 41 of its 48 countries being low or lower middle income (including Ghana; World Bank, 2022). Harnessing the economic potential of these young people will be essential for generating the revenue to pay for the state infrastructure they will need to ensure the benefits of citizenship, such as provision of education and health services (Abdi et al., 2005). In Ghana, more than one in four births (28.89%) are not even registered (Dake and Fuseini, 2018), which potentially significantly reduces the numbers of citizens able to participate in national elections in the decades to come. This is despite Ghana being celebrated as 'a

successful model of multi-party democracy in Africa' with 'relatively free and fair competitive multi-party elections' (Awal and Paller, 2016: 2).

Ghana's democratic history is relatively short. In 1957, Ghana (then named Gold Coast) gained independence from the United Kingdom and became a republic in 1960. Its journey to democracy was interrupted by four coups, before the country again became a multi-party state in 1992, with the first change of government resulting from democratic elections in 2001. Across eight elections (to 2020), the National Democratic Party (NDC) and the New Patriotic Party (NPP) have both held power, often supported by agreements with smaller parties. The state has attempted to ensure voter validation, amidst fears of fraud by those without the right to vote. The fear of 'foreign' influence in elections in Ghana relates to its proximity to and relatively porous borders with its neighbours and near-neighbours, including Togo and Nigeria. Many Ghanaians migrate to neighbouring countries such as Togo seeking work opportunities (Raunet Robert-Nicoud, 2020), while others migrate internationally (Gyekye-Jandoh, 2016). Citizens living abroad retain the right to vote in Ghanaian elections, contributing to a perception of 'cross-border voting' (Raunet Robert-Nicoud, 2020) leading to the introduction of biometric verification for the 2012 election. However, due to poor electoral governance, the election outcome (won by the NDC) was challenged by the NPP in the courts (Debrah et al., 2019).

In the global North, recent decades have seen the 'culturalization of citizenship' (Tonkens and Duyvendak, 2016: 3), where migrants who attain legal citizenship – including the right to vote – are not recognised as 'full' citizens in the cultural sense due to implicit racism (Bassel et al., 2021; Gyekye-Jandoh, 2016). In the Global South, many residents are recognised as full citizens in the culturalisation sense yet achieve legal citizenship only 'in principle' (Hunter, 2019: 268), with no registration documents to evidence their rights. In geo-political terms, sub-Saharan Africa incorporates a diverse range of democratic and autocratic governance across states and, therefore, diverse opportunities for citizenship. Unlike the absence or dysfunction of democratic institutions in other countries in the region (Cheeseman et al., 2018), Ghana is a functioning multi-party democracy, albeit somewhat hampered by political clientelism (Paller, 2014). This situation is typified by the experience of street youth, part of a growing population of Ghana's 14 million urban dwellers, of whom almost half live in informal settlements (Awal and Paller, 2016). The term 'street youth' defines young people who live and work in urban informal settings, although 'youth' and 'street' are debated terms (Aitken, 2001; Hubbard and Lyon, 2018). In most countries, including Ghana, the right to vote is not conferred upon young people until they reach the age of 18 (Wall, 2014). 'Youth' in this context therefore implies those

aged over 18, but because of the challenges of birth registration (as noted earlier), many street youth do not know their precise age (van Blerk et al., 2020). While the right to vote in Ghana is enshrined in law (Electoral Commission Ghana, 2020), street youth encounter a passive denial of citizenship, being part of the urban poor whose births are never registered and whose rights and citizenship benefits are never enacted (Hunter, 2019).

Below, Lamptey recounts his experience of exclusion from voting in parliamentary political elections, which prevented him enacting citizenship by taking part in the apparatus of governance. Through his case study vignette, he describes bodypainting in elections, whereby street youth paint their almost naked bodies to advertise a political party or brand – effectively becoming a human billboard.

After his case study, we go on to explore if bodypainting is a form of political activism whereby Lamptey and other street youth are enacting a constrained 'street citizenship' (van Blerk et al., 2020). 'Street citizenship' is a form of active citizenship that is learned and performed away from the usual sites of citizenship learning (Staeheli and Hammett, 2010; van Blerk et al., 2020). Barred from formal citizenship, street youth partake in forms of political activity that reflect both civic and monetary motives (Adu-Gyamfi, 2014). Despite lacking formal citizenship, street citizenship is thus employed to both challenge and engage in politics. If so, as a political practice by street youth, bodypainting goes beyond everyday local activism to exert constrained power in elections as national-scale events.

Lamptey, a youth researcher, took part in Growing Up on the Streets – a longitudinal research project that took place in three African cities (including Accra, Ghana's capital), with data collection spanning 2012–2016 and impact activities involving street youth ongoing to 2022 (van Blerk et al., 2016). Lamptey was born on the streets of Accra. The photograph was taken in February 2016 during the political campaign leading up to the parliamentary and presidential elections held on 7 December 2016**, won by Nana Akufo-Addo and the NPP, defeating the incumbent John Mahama and the NDC. Participation in activism is not without risk, with violence perpetrated against supporters of both parties (Africa Research Bulletin, 2017). Lamptey's account of bodypainting (see below) is taken from written and verbal WhatsApp conversations (in English) between Hunter and Lamptey in June 2021, and follow-up conversations in preparation for writing this chapter in September 2022. The image was contributed, with Lamptey's permission, in 2016 as supplementary material to Growing Up on the Streets. All other authors found the photograph unsettling at the time and were interested to find out Lamptey's reflections on the experience (Figure 19.1).

FIGURE 19.1
Lamptey performing as a human billboard in the lead up to national elections in 2016.

CASE STUDY BEING A HUMAN BILLBOARD. BY RICHIE O LAMPTEY

LAMPTEY: This is me in the picture. Okay, this is how the whole thing works. It was election time, so I painted myself with any party who would pay me. NPP [New Patriotic Party] paid me, I think it was 50 or 70 cedis (GBP £5–7, US$$6–8). I've painted myself NDC [National Democratic Congress] too. We have a particular place that we normally do that thing. They put on boxers and braces, and they paint themselves. We stuff the boxers full of rags to make our backside look bigger, not natural. Many young men do it, even my own brothers do it. I also take money from people who want to give something to show love for their party.

HUNTER: Did you feel humiliation or powerful when bodypainted and on show?

LAMPTEY: What is humiliation when working for money? I was humiliated but paid. I consider the pay more than the humiliation. Any lucrative contract, I will do it.

HUNTER: Do women ever bodypaint?

LAMPTEY: I have once or twice seen women painting their bodies during election times; they wear bloomers and braces and tie up their hair. They also put rags inside to exaggerate parts of the body and make their waist and their breast big, that is not their natural body. One thing that is against the women painting, is that when they paint, sometimes men on the streets, I think you would have to call it sexual harassment, someone giving you money while on the 'painting field' they will try to touch you up. Me, personally, doing the painting, I've never been harassed before. Someone can come and hold some part of you, others will come and dance with you. Looking at the way we dress, we cover one place for a man, for women, two places. The main reason why I paint myself is because whenever I paint, I get 10 times the money I get from cleaning windscreens. But the side-effects concern me – we have been told several times that painting your entire body could have side-effects from the paint.

I don't like performing, but it is now normal to be painted in traffic because I'm used to it. I started bodypainting before that election, for Barclays Bank, and I even painted during the 2020 election [incumbent President Nana Akufo-Addo (NPP) was re-elected]. That's when the companies want to use that type of advertising, but most of the time it's for political parties.

Let me say it's 10% for the party, and 90% for the money, that's the main reason. You might want to vote for the political party, but you paint yourself for the money. Maybe there's an NPP person who wants to paint himself, so I'll paint myself NDC. So, we don't paint for one party, we paint for the party available. So, if NPP should come and say 'you must go and paint for me', I'll just go and do it. So, anyone who comes and wants painting, we just go, we just deliver.

I have never voted for any party; I don't believe in any of them. I never voted because I need to go through a lot to get voter ID, the national passport ID… Some have voting cards, with the support from their political party who help people register.

The first time I wanted to vote I was denied because I didn't have ID – house address and some other information to confirm that you are from Ghana. I wanted to vote at that time and even now, but they use these terms to deny me.

DISCUSSION

Bodypainting is an accepted cultural practice in Ghana and is used to promote political parties, businesses and special events (Lentz and Budniok, 2007: 23). It shares similarities to human billboards – people who are employed to hold placards or carry sandwich boards (Wolverson, 2013) – but is dynamic, physical and creative; an embodied performance determined by each bodypainter. Bodypainters earn money from passers-by who give tips as a sign of support for their political cause, in full knowledge that the money goes to the performer and not the party. Thus, bodypainting is a lucrative if sporadic addition to a range of work opportunities in the informal economy. For young women, these typically include minding stalls for market sellers, whereas young men wash windscreens, and both carry loads (Growing Up on the Streets, 2015; Shand et al., 2016). In carrying out their everyday work, young people frequently experience discrimination in public spaces (van Blerk et al., 2020), but when performing as a human billboard, Lamptey described feeling humiliation and noted that young women experience sexual harassment. All performers stuff rags into their clothing not only to exaggerate their appearance but also to protect themselves from unwanted touching. In later discussions (September 2022), Lamptey was unwilling to describe this as harassment, as the performance itself invites interaction, and this is how they 'earn' the money: '*Maybe the person is getting closer to you, holding hands with you, or putting his hand around your neck to take a picture… At the end of the day, you have shown your body, and you are going into it for the money*'. Although not articulated by performers, accentuating gendered body parts may add to their clown-like performance, while both inviting and protecting against sexualised comments or touching. Lamptey feels this is acceptable in his case, as a young man, but that the line between interaction and sexual harassment is often crossed when it comes to female performers. This may be indicative of gendered power relations, where interactions may be used to undermine women who perform in this primarily male space.

The act and performance of bodypainting tilts our perspective on participation and is, at best, an ironic embodiment of political activism. The embodied nature of the performance personalises the message, whether political or commercial (Lamptey also bodypainted to advertise Barclays Bank), emphasising the transactional nature of bodypainting. He states: '*any lucrative contract, I will do it*'. Despite existing tribal allegiances, he is ready to use party brands to gain tips from supporters and take money from any party that is still 'available' to represent. This partisan attitude may reveal his divided loyalties: to fellow street youth, to God (see photo) and to the party who paid him. By using his body in this way, Lamptey employs a

performance of embodied engagement as his sole means of political engagement in national elections.

The irony is deepened because bodypainting to become a human billboard touches on notions of embodied politics, where the personal becomes political, and localised change is enacted because of individual acts (Fixmer and Wood, 2005). As Bacchi and Beasley point out, '"bodies" and "citizens" are seldom connected' (2002: 324), yet here, street youth use their bodies to perform a political statement, even if the primary reason is money rather than political beliefs.

This challenges the notion that Lamptey is partaking in a citizenship practice, as his main motivation is primarily financial. Using his own body for political engagement – rather than, say, handing out leaflets – seems to emphasise his lack of status in the political landscape in which he performs. Yet, Lamptey is aware of this political landscape. As a member of the Ga tribe, he has previously stated a tribal alignment with the NDC, indicative of the partial role of ethnic influences in Ghanaian elections (Bob-Milliar and Paller, 2016; Lindberg and Morrison, 2008).

The final irony of Lamptey's performance is his acknowledgement that he would like to engage in the political process, despite expressing a lack of faith in political parties. While stating that he does not support a party and has never done so, it is clear from his closing statements that he feels he has been denied his democratic rights to participate as a citizen. He declares that he has no belief in any political party, yet then explains that in the past and 'even now' he '"*wanted to vote*" but is unable to because he lacks ID and an address'. He acknowledges that it is possible to seek assistance from political parties to gain electoral registration but has not himself taken part in this 'clientelism', where political parties assist voters to gain voter registration, in an unstated quid pro quo (Awal and Paller, 2016; Lindberg and Morrison, 2008). This underlines his political ambivalence; he seeks to achieve formal citizenship as a corroboration of his affective citizenship, rather than political allegiance. However, unable to access his citizenship rights, he participates through performance; exploiting the process to earn money, and denying he was ever interested anyway, stating 'I have never voted for any party; I don't believe in any of them'.

Lamptey's actions as an 'in principle' citizen could be seen as symbolic of disempowerment, in a transactional performance that possibly further diminishes his social status as well as his self-esteem. Disenfranchised by the system that he promotes, the bodypainting performance presents a parody of citizenship: a lucrative activism that exchanges financial gain for potential votes. By occupying the space of political activism, Lamptey presents himself as a political activist, but his primary aim remains making money from

a political system that offers him no other benefits. Forced into the role of an outsider to the democratic process, bodypainting disrupts the ideas of citizen political engagement, parodying true engagement as it is performed for short-term rewards rather than longer term political change. In a backlash against youth disenfranchisement, bodypainters turn notions of political engagement on their head – using their agency, skills in bodypainting and performing to generate funds, not for political parties but for themselves. The performance is also a dynamic opposition to (the presumption of) youth apathy or disengagement from political processes (see Parvin, 2018), or the presumption that young people do not deserve the right to vote due to a lack of autonomy (see Wall, 2014).

Yet Lamptey's case study illustrates a paradox: while he himself is denied formal citizenship, he exhibits a street-level activist citizenship (see van Blerk et al., 2020) – an expression of the right of street youth to be visible on the streets and (ironically) encouraging the civic act of voting. This is indicative of his affective citizenship as a Ga, as a Ghanaian, and his emotional and social connection to the society he lives within. Clearly, Lamptey identifies with his national, tribal and street youth identities, but this does not compensate for the passive official denial of his Ghanaian nationality and deprivation of citizenship. This disenfranchisement – which affects millions of other young people worldwide – should be a primary concern of governments and societies everywhere.

In the case of street youth in Ghana, it is possible to achieve evidence of citizenship via letters from two recognised citizens, but the processes are unknown to street youth and the requisite relationships difficult to establish, given their broader marginalisation. The financial requirements of gaining documentation are also impossible to meet in an informal economy where street youth often barely make enough to meet their daily needs. Formalising citizenship is important to enable states to harness the economic and civic potential of citizens to contribute to society (Abdi et al., 2005). Democratic states have established governmental structures that enrol citizens into its responsibilities and activities, such as registering births and collecting tax revenues, but these structures can also act as points of exclusion (Bassel et al., 2021). With the growth of displaced populations, coupled with a growing birth rate, the problems of young people who merely possess 'in principle' citizenship will only increase.

CONCLUSION

The right to vote is a fundamental symbol of citizenship yet it is a right that is denied to many people who are 'in principle citizens' – those who, by

rights of birth, nationality and cultural belonging, should be able to vote but are excluded from gaining the ID that would enable them to do so. Those who neither attain nor are endowed with the formal citizenship they are entitled to by birth and culture fail to benefit from its manifestations or play a role in its processes and enactment. Significantly for states, by neglecting to deliver universal franchise to those who hold a right to it, they miss opportunities to harness the economic, political and social potential of their citizens. However, while citizenship of street-connected youth is not formally validated, they are participating in street-level activist citizenship, of which performing as a human billboard is just one example. The ironic performance of citizenship is, in itself, indicative of an affective citizenship, while contradicting notions of youth apathy and lack of autonomy. By encouraging participation, street youth demonstrate their national and street identities and sense of belonging, showing that their affective citizenship is intact. Bodypainting in this view is no longer a *parody*, in the sense of an exaggerated imitation of citizenship, but a *paradox*; youth are disenfranchised but continue to perform citizenship in the only ways open to them.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Our thanks to Selassy Gbeglo for the photograph of Lamptey. Growing Up on the Streets was funded by the Backstage Trust.

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