

Chapter 1

Defining Youth: Pastoral Implications for Africa

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Introduction

“Youth” is a slippery term that defies any precise definition. Yet, everyone talks about youth, in academics, pastoral ministry, and daily life. Is the concept of youth really so straightforward? Take, for instance, the age criterion in defining youth. The age-range could be as low as 12 years, as is the case in the Ugandan Youth Policy (Uganda, 2001), and as high as 35 years, as in the Kenyan constitution, or even 40 years as in the Malaysian Youth Policy. Other people offer a descriptive definition of youth in terms of energy, dynamism, and vitality. Today, as life-expectancy gets prolonged in most countries, people live very energetic and active lives when they are 80 years and more. So, does a person of 80 qualify to be classified as youth? How do we define youth, then?

There are several reasons that contribute to the fluidity of the terminology and conceptualisation of youth. One of the reasons is the transitional character itself of the age-group of people that the term refers to. When a society is in an accelerated state of flux the first groups that are likely to be affected are children and youth (Chisholm, 1990, p.17). To a small or large degree, this has been true throughout human history: the nature of being youth has been changing. Therefore, there is indeed an historical impact on the definition of youth. When the New Testament speaks about children and youth (Mk 10:13-16; 1Pet 5:5), what age-group of people is it talking about? Could that be different from the way the Hebrew Scriptures talk about children and youth? And could that be totally different from the understanding of the Kenyan constitution?

Consider an example from history. Don Bosco, a Catholic priest of Turin in Italy, is acclaimed as one of the first to begin a youth club (also referred to as “youth patronage”), and this was in the context of the Catholic Church in the 19th Century (Loncle, 2009). The “youth” he worked with, were they young men in their 30’s, as the Kenyan constitution would like to have it? Not at all. He worked among 15-year olds. So, what has happened to the concept of youth in the 20th Century?

Despite these intricacies around the term ‘youth’, a serious consideration on the nuances of the term is seldom a subject for study. Therefore, the objective of this article is to explore the meaning of “youth” and other terms related to it, such as: child, adolescent, teenager, emerging adult. The paper also looks at different criteria employed to define youth. Often, the paper focuses on terminology tracing their etymology and historical origin. As the French historian Aries (1962) argues, the absence of specific terminology to refer to a particular age of development implies that people of that era did not feel the need for explicit distinction of those age groups. On the contrary, the introduction of a specific term to refer to a particular age-group means that this group began to gain noticeable significance in terms of numbers and social role. Thus, it is important to point out the implication of terminologies and the difficulty in the definition and conceptualisation of youth. Due to lack of data, we will explore the global scenario and conceptually extend it to the African context, pointing out the pastoral implications of such conceptualisation.

Evolution of Terms

Child - It is likely that the word, ‘child’ - as referring to a young person before the onset of puberty - originated from Danish and German roots, and entered into English usage during late Old English, around the 11th or 12th century. According to various dictionaries, originally the term referred to a person below the age of reason, say, between five and six years of age. Eventually the term evolved into meaning below the age of puberty. While this usage continues up to this day, legally a child is equated with a minor who does not have a legal

autonomy, and in most countries, this is up to the age of 18. The latter meaning is held by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1990. In this context, in the use of the term ‘child,’ there is an overlap of stage-markers: while in the strict sense of the word, child is someone before the age of puberty, legally this could extend to 18 years. This enmeshed conceptualisation of child raises issues in legal and moral debates, such as those related to child abuse and child labour. While someone is likely to attain puberty by the age of 11 or 12, in many countries, any sexual activity prior to 18, would be legally considered an abuse. Eighteen is the magical age across the globe. In most African countries, with some variations, 18 marks the voting age, driving age, legal drinking age, employability age, etc. It is important to add that the time prior to puberty is marked by different stages. In other words, childhood could be internally stratified into distinct stages which are referred to by means of different words in English: infant, toddler, pre-schooler. A foetus is a child before birth, and a toddler is one who begins to move on their four limbs. ‘Infant’ originally in English meant a child up to the age of seven, however, through the centuries, the word has come to refer to someone who is still hand-held by the caregiver, or who is speechless. A pre-schooler would be someone below the age of five or six, since in most countries, children begin their formal education by that age.

Adolescent - In terms of age, adolescence is said to cover the period between 11 and 19 in human development. Academic literature further delineates adolescence in two stages: early adolescence (approximately from 11 to 15 years) and late adolescence (approximately from 16 to 19 years) (Cobb, 2001). The age criterion around understanding adolescence is not that straightforward, either. Stanley Hall, one of the early psychologists who is acclaimed as the father of the study of adolescence (Hall, 1904), considered adolescence as the period of life of an individual from 12 to 23 years of age.

We might consider defining adolescence using three approaches: biological, psychological, and sociological. Biologically, adolescence is that transitional period that is marked by physical changes of puberty that quite literally transform a child into a sexually mature adult. These biological changes are more proper to early adolescence. Even if there could be individual differences and geographical specificities around the onset of puberty, the changes that accompany puberty are universal. Psychologically, adolescence is marked by the striving to forge a stable identity for one's self. This need emerges not only out of the biological changes that have happened in the adolescent, but also because of cognitive development and social expectations. Sociologically, adolescence is a transitional period during which the individual is not yet an adult meriting an autonomous status in the society, nor is the person a child who is totally dependent on the society. From this perspective, adolescence ends at the definite stage of legal autonomy in terms of privileges such as driving a car, casting a vote, drinking alcohol.

In summary, biological developments bring about the task for the individual to adjust to the new look and functions of the body, cognitive developments challenge them to search for significance of what they know and believe, and purpose in what they do and plan. Social norms expect them to develop skills in dealing with others, even in terms of intimate relationships. Two influential scholars need to be mentioned in the scientific study of adolescence. Hall (1904) considered adolescence as an age of turbulence and stress. In his scientific study of adolescence, Hall focused mainly on the biological and psychological aspect of the growth of adolescence. Margaret Mead (1928), on the other hand, in her anthropological study of adolescents, focused on the sociocultural dimensions of their growth. Drawing her data from her study of the indigenous people of the island of Samoa, Mead suggested that when cultures provide a gradual transition from childhood to adulthood, as it is the case in most traditional societies, there is practically no storm and stress associated with adolescence (Santrock, 1981).

Teenager - The term, teenager is closely related to adolescent. Teenage and teenager are newcomers to the English lexicon. Teenage was first used in English in the context of Sunday School classes in 1911, and teenager in 1922. Its meaning is quite straightforward: a person aged from 13 to 19. Due to this age criterion the words adolescence and teenage are also used interchangeably (Sumter, Bokhorst, Steinberg, & Westenberg, 2009). In any case, the word 'teen' often evokes predetermined feelings in people of various categories, often related to negative behaviour. Parents might think of the endless arguments that they have had with their teens, forgetting very conveniently the arguments that they had with their own parents when they were teens. People in authority, especially, those in educational institutions might think of teens as rebels.

One of the hilarious forms of teen rebellions has been reported from the University of Michigan in 1952 (Panati, 1991). It began with shouts, "To the girl's dorm!" The young men would target and covet a piece of the ladies' lingerie, and proudly display them among their peers. The young women seem to have even enjoyed this harmless fun. They would toss around their stockings, panties and bras teasing the boys. On a more serious note, the 1950's also marked the formation of youth gangs in urban areas around the globe, often centred on slums and informal settlements. Even though early signs of gangs were reported in the U.S as early as 1783 at the end of the War of Independence, more acute forms were seen among Mexican migrants in 1813. This could partly explain the negative connotation associated with 'teenager' as a term.

Youth - The word youth might be as old as the English language, even if related words such as "young" and "youthful" are later entries. Arnett (2000) points out that the original meaning of "youth" in English denoted a child in general, and for what later began to be referred to as adolescent. The United Nations acknowledge that the term youth is more fluid than other age-groups of the human population and hence not easily defined. However, based on the description of youth as a period of transition from the dependence of

childhood to the independence of adulthood, taking into consideration that in the contemporary global situation independence could be described in terms of leaving compulsory education, and finding their own first job, an age bracket could be stipulated for this group. Therefore, “the UN Secretariat uses the terms youth and young people interchangeably to mean age 15-24 with the understanding that member states and other entities use different definitions” (UNDESA, 2013). In any case, the main purpose of the age criterion, as claimed by UN, is for statistical purposes.

Despite the definitiveness of this age criterion offered by the UN, a few other entities within the UN do have different criteria. The age-criterion for UN Habitat – Youth Fund, for instance, is from 15 to 32 (UN Habitat, 2017). This is justifiable given that this criterion is used for the purposes of disbursement of funds. On the other hand, The African Youth Charter extends the age of youth ranging from 15 to 35 (African Union, 2006). Other African member states have varying age-criteria, often contradicting policies and documents within the same country. “The Kenyan Youth is defined as one aged between 15-30 years old” (Government of Kenya, 2006, p.1). However, the constitution extends the age up to 35. The Tanzanian Youth Policy (2007), on the other hand, states that “Youth in Tanzania shall be defined as young men and women from the age group of 15 to 35” (p.10). While taking into consideration the international definitions of youth, the Republic of Uganda (2001) acknowledges “that [as] the family and extended kinship ties loosen due to the different factors many young people by the age of 12 years have assumed adult responsibilities.” Hence Ugandan age criterion for youth would extend from 12 to 30 years.

In general, then, we notice that there is no universal age criterion in defining youth. However, extending the upper limit of the age-criterion to 30, 35, or even 40 (as is the case in Malaysia), some authors argue, is an expression of “gerontocracy,” that is, the domination of the political processes in a society by older people (Burton & Charton-Bigot, 2010). Such a situation is observable even

in Africa, as it is the case with the Kenya criterion of 35 years being the upper limit for youth. We will discuss the implications of this in the next section. Another problem with the age criterion is that we see overlaps between different groups. Going by the above criterion of the UN, of youth being from the age of 15 to 24, we could assume that someone below the age of 15 would be a child. However, the 1979 Convention on Children Rights defines a child as someone up to the age of 18. This means that someone between the age of 15 and 18 years is a child and youth at the same time; similarly, someone from 19 to 24 years is an adult and youth at the same time.

Given the muddle of patterns with the age-criterion, many scholars in youth studies, prefer to use the age-criterion only as a reference point for the purposes of a particular consideration, and move on to explore the identity of youth within “social and cultural practices in the life trajectories of young people” focusing on the social construction of identity of young people (Nilan & Feixa, 2006). Taken together, the age-criterion exhibits an awkward confusion. It is almost always relative to the cultural and historical contexts. Maturity-criterion, on the other hand, is in a constant flux. As the society evolves in such a way that it influences growth patterns, then it is likely to alter the definition of the various stages of life-long development. If the rate of social change itself accelerates, then the change of definitions too experience an obvious fluidity. There is often also a gender-bias in the conceptualisation and use of the term, “youth,” perhaps, a persistent residue since the colonial times particularly in Africa (Waller, 2006). Often, youth behaviour is a typical male experience. Such a one-sided perspective breeds a general negative rhetoric around the youth, characterised by violence, rebellion, and crisis. Recently, many scholars have called for a balanced and realistic treatment of youth in research (Akom, Cammarota, & Ginwright, 2008) in terms of gender and valence around youth.

Emerging Adult and Young adult - Given the developments in the 20th Century that have prolonged youth-hood, Arnett proposes “Emerging adulthood” as “a new conception of development for

the period from the late teens through the twenties, with a focus on ages 18-25" (Arnett, 2000, p.469; see also Arnett, 2004). He argues that this period in the development of individuals, since the second part of the 20th century, particularly in the industrialised countries, has become a distinct phase. The individuals who are negotiating this period are not adolescents anymore nor are they adults yet. The emerging adults enjoy relative independence from social roles and normative expectations of childhood, yet they have not taken up enduring responsibility in the society in terms of marriage and parenthood. Often, they are still exploring their possible life direction with regard to love, work, and worldviews. John Abbott (2001) sums up this situation rather succinctly:

In 1900 the average girl started to menstruate at about the age of 19. Now, with better food and health care, menstruation frequently starts shortly after a girl's 10th birthday. In 1900, most boys were sufficiently well established in a job by the age of 20 that they could afford to marry and start a family. The gap between childhood and becoming a fully responsible adult was measured in months rather than years. But not now, not in the year 2001.

Closely related to "emerging adult", is "young adult". Young adult as a concept is older than emerging adult. Though Levinson (1986) does not use the term, in delineating different stages of adult development, he speaks of "early adulthood" as lasting from about the age of 17 to 40. This stage is prior to midlife and late adulthood. He notes: "Biologically, the 20s and 30s are the peak years of the life cycle. In social and psychological terms, early adulthood is the season for forming and pursuing youthful aspirations, establishing a niche in society, raising a family, and as the era ends, reaching a more "senior" position in the adult world" (Levinson, 1986, p.5). The key point implied in being an adult is "settling down" in terms of a job, marriage and family. Therefore, young adults are those who have settled down in some aspects of their life. At the same time, the term, "young adult" distinguishes that age group from those who belong to "late adulthood," who might be grandparents. After all, in

some societies a person is recognised as an adult only after the death of the parents (Moran, 1992).

Generation X, Y, Z, Millennials and Centennials - There are several other terms that are used, mostly in the Western societies, to refer to young people belonging to different generational groups. These terms refer to cohorts of young people who were born in certain decades of the 20th century. The decades following the two World Wars witnessed rapid sociocultural changes in the West. These terms show how the cohort of people born during a particular decade after the 1950s exhibits certain common characteristics. This section examines some of the generational terms.

Generation X refers to those who were born in the 1960s and 1970s, who were noticed as having specific characteristics by writers of the 1990s, when the young people of Generation X were in their teens (Collins-Mayo & Dandellion, 2010). This term was popularised by Douglas Coupland (1991) in his book, *Generation X*. The Gen-X are said to have an ironic view of the world, emerging from the collapse of public institutions and the family breakdown of the 1960s. They are also largely referred to as post-boomers. That is, Generation X is the cohort who are mostly the children of the baby-boomers. The *baby-boomers* are those who were born from around 1945 to 1964. These decades were marked by the restructuring of European societies, and an economic boom for Europe and America. With improved healthcare, these decades also witnessed a population boom. By the time these people reached their teenage years, the society witnessed a widespread attitude that challenged traditional cultures and institutionalised religions.

Generation Y is used to refer to the cohort of those who were born in the 1980s and 1990s. They are the inheritors to Generation X. Those born in 1990s are also called the Millennial generation. They grew up reading or watching Lord of the Rings and Harry Potter. They are the generation of the soap operas, increased consumerism, and of weekend culture. They take refuge in popular culture (Savage, Collins-Mayo, & Mayo, 2006). With this generation we

see an emergence of a strong entertainment culture that centres around celebrities. There are also other tags referring to teenagers: Generation Z, iGen, Post-Millennials, and Centennials. These refer to people born after 1996. This generation grew up with iphones, internet, and social media. They are comfortable with i-technology. They are the children of the times of war on terror and global culture. They are said to be compassionate, largely open-minded and global in perspective, determined and competitive. They are also adventurous and curious (Seemiller & Grace, 2016).

Some authors have critiqued these categories of cohorts as mere constructs of the media and based on popular literature rather than scientific recognition of unique features (Lynch, 2010). Therefore, these cohort classifications are not to be taken as absolute categories, but only as useful generalisations to understand the youth of the recent decades. In the African context, these categories may not be meaningful in rural areas, but in the urban set ups the generations could have been delayed by a decade or two. However, the contemporary generation has largely caught up with most of the aspects of the culture of the global youth. As for the pastoral implication of these cohorts, it is important to consider the attitude of the Post-boomers of the Western societies to religion. Flory and Miller (2008) point out the following, among other peculiarities: they perceive religion to be a choice rather than an obligation; they arise above denominational identifications; they are likely to seek religious experience rather than focus on insipid rituals; and they tend to be eclectic in their religious perspective. At least some of these characteristics could be identified among the urban African youth born around the turn of the millennium. More studies have to be carried out to confirm such phenomena.

Emerging insights

Most terms and concepts that we have listed and explored above, are culturally constructed, and not universal and immutable (Arnett, 2000; Cobb, 2001). Therefore, we are likely to see new terms emerging with reference to youth, and old terms taking on new

meanings as history progresses. What are the socio-cultural elements that have influenced the rise and connotation of these terms? We can trace various historical phenomena that have influenced the conceptualisation of youth. Some of these elements are antecedent variables, others are consequents, and still others mediating variables. However, it is not always easy to tease out the sequence of these variables pointing out exactly what followed as a consequence of what.

Industrialisation is a good point to start with. In terms of years, the Industrial Revolution took place from 1760 to 1840, in Europe and America. Eventually, it became a global phenomenon extending to the post-colonial newly founded nations in Africa, Asia and Latin America. As a result, cities began to emerge and expand. Cities also welcomed prospective workers from villages to work in the industries in the urban areas. Most of these workers were young people. In the early decades of the industrial era, the working and living conditions of the migrants were poor; they were hardly educated and skilled. As industrialisation became the norm of the city, the jobs around the industry were diversified: administration, service, and manufacturing. This also created a class system on the basis of the skills and knowledge that individuals possessed and their corresponding access to wealth. These developments directly affected the youth, including the universalisation of school education that was needed to keep the young children occupied when their parents went to work outside their homes, and to prepare the younger generation to fit into the industrial society.

In the African situation, the dynamics are more complex. Positively looked at, these developments in the cities provided a possibility to decongest the tension between the elders and the youth in the rural societies (Burton & Charton-Bigot, 2010). It provided an opportunity for the youth to be independent. In traditional Africa, youth was conceptualised and defined in such a way that domination by the elderly was maintained. This was done to regulate access to resources, including women, cattle, land, and social authority. The age-based social stratification was well marked by means of

Improved living conditions and medical life have contributed to prolonged life expectancy. "Until relatively recently in history, most people did not live beyond their fifties; the age of 40 was considered old. Today, reaching 40 signals the passing of youth. Prior to 1800s, only 2% of the U.S. population reached the age of 65. Not until the 1900s did substantial numbers of people live into their sixties. Now many people live healthy lives well into their seventies and eighties" (Cobb, 2001, p.31; see also Aries, 1962). Prolonged adulthood has had its impact on prolonged youthhood, in that the adults are socially and economically active for a longer time depriving the youth of the space and opportunity. This confounds with the easy access that youth have to knowledge, which was, in the previous centuries, a privilege of the adults.

Similarly, improved food habits and health care have contributed to early physical maturity in terms of puberty (Abbott, 2001; Arnett, 2004). And delayed social maturity, for reasons stated above, has totally redefined youthhood since the second part of the 20th century. It is not surprising that, in locations such as Samoa, later studies have denied the works of Mead, since adolescence has already become a period of turbulence and storm (Santrock, 1981). Similar situations could be observed in African societies. This suggests that adolescence is culturally constructed, and as societies get more and more urbanised adolescence also becomes more and more of a turbulent.

There are at least three summary points that need to be pointed out from the above discussion. Firstly, there is a divide between the rural and urban settings when it comes to youth situations. In the traditional rural societies puberty is largely delayed, mature adolescents settle down early in work, marriage, and childbearing. However, they could be targets of delayed independence from the control of the adults. On the other hand, in modern urban societies, adolescents attain puberty earlier; they are moved towards early independence from adults, but they delay in settling down in a job and marriage due to prolonged formal education. This parity is very conspicuous

in contemporary Africa, where the difference between urban setting and rural life is still huge.

Secondly, the discourse around youthhood revolves around a tension between dependence and independence. Childhood is defined in terms of dependence, and adulthood in terms of independence, and contemporary youthhood in terms of the tension between the two. While the modern urban life creates possibilities for independence on account of access to knowledge and early physical maturity, the same urban context also provides factors for dependence due to prolonged school life and delayed settling down in marriage and parenthood. This has given rise to newer identity groups in terms of age criterion: teenager, emerging adult, and young adult.

Finally, the speed of social change itself is accelerating. This means that even during the second half of the last century realities have changed at a speed that leaves no pattern undisturbed. Hence, there was a need to talk of Generation X, Y, Z. Almost every score of years has had a unique cohort. This simply tells us that the situation and the needs of youth in the decades to come are unpredictable. Social scientists have to keep their feelers sharply tuned to assess youth situation for adequate response. And this has its pastoral implications particularly in societies such as in Africa where the accelerating change is being realised just before our eyes.

Pastoral Implications

In the context of the church, the conceptualisation of youth as it has been explored above has direct implications on the understanding and operationalisation of youth ministry. While the Catholic church is acknowledged to have initiated several approaches to youth work (Loncle, 2009), the nature and scope of youth ministry within the church has been focussed on sacramental catechesis. More precisely, youth ministry in the Catholic church centred around early adolescents preparing for sacraments of Holy Communion and Confirmation. Suddenly, due to the social changes described above, even in the church, we are left with a gaping question: what do we with our youth between confirmation and matrimony? Against this

backdrop, there have been several attempts at conceptualising and operationalising youth ministry, often also with inspiration from other churches (Borgman, 1997; Selvam, 2006; Yaconelli, 2006). As far as Africa is concerned, youth ministry could be considered vibrant in terms of participation, but still at an experimental stage in content and methodology. Perhaps it will always remain an experiment, given the fluidity of the youth situation itself.

Even in this fluid situation, however, there is a need for a definition of youth within the church context. As long as youth remain undefined, they will be a vulnerable group, risking the neglect of adults, or worse still, manipulation according to the needs of adults (Selvam, 2008). As a working definition, youthhood could be suggested as a window period between puberty and marriage or another form of settling down that will offer a social adult identity. For the purposes of youth ministry within the church, we might define youth as a person between confirmation and matrimony who is still in ongoing catechesis as an adolescent and emerging adult. Even within this group, it is better to have them sub-divided into age-groups with specific formation programmes. The implication of this is also that there is a need to have groups for young adults who might be employed and/or are married.

Given the complexity of the youth situation as it has emerged from the above discussion, and in the light of the theme of the Synod for Youth, 2018, youth ministry in Africa has to move from an event-focussed activism to a process-oriented accompaniment (Selvam, 2006). Preparation for the vocation to married life has to move beyond the immediate concerns of a church wedding and a sacramental event to living the sacrament in enduring love throughout their life (Selvam, 2004). Youth formation has to move from training in life-skills (Selvam, 2008b) to coaching in character strengths that focus on virtues such as fairness, compassion, integrity, self-control (Selvam & Collicutt, 2013). Previous empirical studies carried out in the Nairobi context suggested that the building up of character strengths can be best achieved not just by means of seminars and workshops but through contemplative practice (Selvam & Mwangi,

2014; Selvam, 2015). Together with teaching young people to contemplate (Yaconelli, 2006), introducing them to one-on-one spiritual accompaniment (Selvam, 2013) will assist the young Christians greatly in defining their own identity and exploring their Christian calling in these fluid times.

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Chapter 2

Youth Ministry in Parishes: Joy of Life and Vocation

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The Preparatory Document for the 2018 Synod on *Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment* opens with the words: “These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full”, (Jn. 15:11). In several places, the document draws attention to the connection between the fullness of life and joy and the realization of vocation. Used in this sense, the term *vocation* is rooted in the simple but profound truth that every single person in existence is personally known and loved by God. One recalls here the words of the Gospel of Matthew, “You are worth hundreds of sparrows” (Mt.10:29-31). This love, with which we are enfolded, includes purpose, a unique life path through which a person attains his or her own personal happiness and fulfilment and so also contributes to the happiness of others. We can perhaps think of this as God’s *dream* for a person; a dream God continually works to realise, even though the person may frustrate this commitment by making choices without reference to God: by sin, negligence or indifference. It is fundamentally important to be convinced that God’s purpose and original desire and plan for every person is *happiness*.

This being the case, the Synod challenges us to examine whether the adult church provides young people with the support they need to come to an understanding of their life’s purpose: called to happiness through specific life choices. A starting point in this examination within the context of church would be to consider what might be the ideal setting within which to foster the sense of vocation in a young person. In most cases it would happen first of all in the family where a young person first develops the concept of self-worth, reflected in the care and attention of the parents and other family members.