

Anti-Gang, *Arimaj*, and the War on Street Children in Port-au-Prince

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“Pierre told me about how important it was to wash your mouth before sleeping. Otherwise rats and roaches would come to eat from there at night. This was the same conversation in which he told me that the thing he feared most about the streets was *z'am* – weapons. When I asked him whose weapons he was afraid of, he cited two groups - *z'am polis* [weapons of the police], and *z'am vòlèz* [weapons of thieves]. It was then that I began to understand Haitian streets as violently contested spaces, where street children vie with vermin and each other, with Anti-Gang and the *malfacteurs*, in a violent struggle for security in wakefulness and in slumber. And then there is the *arimaj*....”

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The impact of violence on the everyday lives of street children in Haiti has been an overlooked phenomenon. Though official numbers are nearly impossible to come by, it is conservatively estimated that close to 500,000 of the country's 7 million people are children under the age of eighteen years living and working in and about the streets of the major cities and villages. When one also considers that the great majority of these displaced children are sleeping, fighting, surviving, and dying in the streets of the nation's capital of Port-au-Prince, it is difficult to imagine how such a large social stratum has been neglected by researchers who are concerned with the processes of democratization and state formation in Haiti.

Since 1994, I have focussed my ethnographic field research in Port-au-Prince on the survival of street children and their lived experience of the myriad of violences that form the backdrop of their adolescence. What I have observed is displaced children comporting themselves in relation to the street as a violent and contested place; I have also observed the Haitian state increasingly comporting itself in relation to street children as a criminalized subset of the Haitian civil society – one cast in terms of its propensities for brutality, vagabondism, and disorder. As a result, ‘the street’ in Haiti becomes the violent terrain upon which the strife for democratic order is being fought.

Since the summer of 1999, I had been working in a section of Port-au-Prince called Pòtay Leyogàn, near the southern entrance of Boulevard Jean-Jacques Dessalines. It is a crowded and congested place, the boarding area for the *tap-taps* (rattletrap public buses) to Léogâne about twenty miles west of the capital. It is also a very violent place of late, prompting most Haitians to refer to the neighborhood uneasily as ‘Kosovo’. For the past year and half or so, Pòtay Leyogàn has been plagued by gangsterism, gunplay, drug terrorism, and violent, chaotic sweeps by paramilitary tactical units of the Haitian National Police (HNP). It is also home to some several hundred street children who range in age from five or six years to as old as eighteen and beyond.

The section where I worked in Pòtay Leyogàn was near the entrance to the National Cemetery, and I remark in my fieldnotes the irony of children living both figuratively and literally so close to death. Sewage runs raw and uncontained through the gutters and into homes, rats and roaches abound, and the air nearly vibrates in anticipation of the next unleashing of brutality. Gunfire, political as well as criminal in nature, barks out in sputters at unpredictable times. The place feels like purgatory to me, filthy and tormented but transitory, temporary. For the children who live there, it must be akin to hell.

Most of the kids in the street in Pòtay Leyogàn sniff *siment* (a vaporous cobbler's glue), which brings on a grievous zombification that inhibits their better judgements and indulges desperate aggression. They

are difficult and sometimes hazardous to approach, but the data that they provide to the anthropologist is invaluable, as they clearly experience the street differently than other street kids. Nevertheless, one has to work very delicately with these children, because they're unpredictable and can be dangerous. Many street children in Haiti tote razors (called *jilet*) which they scavenge from trash dumps in the street, and many have nasty scars from fights with them; but only the huffed-up kids in Kosovo would be desperate enough to use them unprovoked. My strategy for working with them was unusual for an ethnographer, but necessary given the circumstances. My research assistant and I would go into the neighborhood *touni* ('naked') - no camera, no bags, no recorder. Just a notebook and pen. These particular children had a tendency to obstreperously surround us, making it necessary to keep our backs to the wall while talking with them. Occasionally, we would have to abort an interview with a street kid here, after he or others would grow impatient and threaten us. Sometimes, if the interview environment was getting palpably dangerous, we would retreat with some of the children by taxi to Chanmas, a large, open, and usually safe plaza outside of Pòtay Leyogàn near the National Palace. To some extent, it is these hostile circumstances and the desperation with which they come that have contributed to the state's hard line position on fighting its 'democratic' war on a young, poor populace among whom are its most numerous casualties.

Though they are frequently regarded as largely beyond the normative socializing control of adult society, there is ample evidence to support the claim that children who live on the street develop their own social organizations, territorial domains, and networks of support linked to the sharing of food and goods. Despite such evidence, rising popular conceptions frequently portray street children as *unsocialized* or *asocial* threats to established order; further, street children are frequently represented as the primary causes of escalation in social ills, such as crime, drugs, prostitution, and inner-city decay. The construction of these negative identities perpetuates the image of street children in Port-au-Prince as nuisances and criminals - maligned as a tacit and persistent reminder of Haitian society's inability or unwillingness to protect its children. They become de-legitimated criminals - and thus acceptable targets for civil and hence state reproach.

Further, sickness, scarcity, sexual abuse, hunger, and thirst all contribute to a set of conditions which routinize greater rates of child morbidity and child death on the boulevards of Port-au-Prince. The persistence of these conditions has been compounded by both the Haitian public and private sectors, which have come to normalize child morbidity and death as an expected outcome for children who live and work on the street. The very fact that such a reality has become veritable Haitian custom further amplifies the problem as it contributes to the social invisibility of street children.

It was over the course of several months of interviews with street children in Port-au-Prince neighborhoods that I began to learn of the antagonistic stance taken by the Haitian state and its paramilitary proxies toward displaced youth, especially those in the blighted areas of Port-au-Prince, like Pòtay Leyogàn. In order to understand the nature of this crisis however, it is necessary to understand the roles of the various actors and agents involved.

The predominant forms of street violence in Haiti today are largely quasi-political in nature, and loosely understood by most Haitians to be taxonomically divisible into two different types - the violence of the *malfacteurs* and the violence of *zenglendos*. *Malfacteur* violence is largely understandable as 'gangsterism', and has its ultimate origins in drug trafficking. The use of Haiti as a primary transshipment point for cocaine by the Colombian Cali cartel dates to the mid-1980s. Beneficence from the profits of the contraband has long been considered a not-so-secret perk of high rank in the Haitian military. In early 1994, during the waning days of the Cedras coup d'état, Patrick Elie (then the coordinator of Haiti's anti-drug campaign) delivered a press briefing at the Haitian Embassy in Washington, D.C. at which he referred to drug trafficking as the "engine" that drove the Haitian Army and overwhelmed the island's commerce with numbers-running, smuggling, and money-laundering operations. He went on to point

out that the Cedras coup guaranteed a “quantum leap” in the trade, involving government agencies of public service and state-controlled institutions such as the Port Authority, which regulates not only imports and exports, but access to the civilian and military airports as well.

With the restoration of a tentative democratic order following the UN invasion in September 1994, the Haitian Army was officially disbanded, decentralizing illicit control of the estimated \$250 million a year generated by cocaine interchange. The result was a fragmentation of the local trade, with former Army officers colluding with civilian ‘lieutenants’ in the formation of autonomous gangs that have since diversified themselves into other areas of criminal activity, primarily carjacking and armed robbery. The recruitment of street children by local gang chiefs in the commission of violent crimes is not uncommon, given the desperate poverty of the kids and the coercive intimidation of non-cooperatives by the gangs.

There is also some evidence to suggest that the rise in gang activity in Port-au-Prince is the result of the failure of state authorities to prosecute and disarm human rights violators in the aftermath of the Cedras coup d’etat. In 1995, the local police chief of Cité Soleil (a sprawling slum in the capital) estimated the membership of *L’Armée Rouge* (the Red Army), a mercenary gang in that area, to number over 200 individuals. Residents of Cité Soleil have suggested that the large majority of armed civilians in their neighborhoods are former secret police and paramilitary who have seized upon the civil distrust of the HNP as an opportunity to stir up trouble.

The violence of the *zenglendos* is something vaguely different, but also finds its origins in the now defunct-Army. Orthographically, the Kreyol word ‘*zenglendo*’ is a combination of ‘*zenglen*’ (‘shards of broken glass’) and ‘*do*’ (‘back’), and was originally used in an old folktale told to children about the *djab*, or ‘devil’. In the story, the *djab* is described as a malicious trickster, bent on the torment of children. Always seeking ways to lure adolescents into despair, the *djab* takes the form of an older person who appeals to a youngster for a back rub. When the child begins to massage the tired muscles of the elder, the *djab* transforms himself into *zenglendo*, transforming his back into a twisted mess of broken glass, horribly cutting the hands of the child. The moral of the tale is clear – sometimes those that we trust can turn on us with malice.

In 1988, amid a rapid succession of coup d’etat following the fall of Jean-Claude Duvalier’s dictatorship, Colonel Prosper Avril assumed control of the Haitian government by overthrowing General Henri Namphy. With Avril’s ascension to power, large blocks of international aid monies to Haiti were suspended, leaving the Haitian Army with little capital with which to pay its *ti soldat* – the ‘little soldiers’ of the rank and file. In response to this crisis, the *ti soldat* began to use their weapons against the Haitian citizenry for their own enrichment, mostly through armed robbery and home invasions. Colonel Avril did nothing to stop this rash of violent Army crimes against the civil society, and the problem worsened. By 1989, a popular radio host in Port-au-Prince coined the folkloric term *zenglendo* to describe the military offenders, implying that with its involvement in armed civil crimes, the Army has transgressed the trust of the people and has turned on them in maliciously new and treacherous fashion.

Eventually, Army *zenglendos* began to recruit civilians for the commission of their crimes, allowing the phenomenon to pass into the civil sector. Today, the term ‘*zenglendo*’ has been divorced from its Army origins and now has become emblematic of a terrifyingly new precedent in Haitian street violence. The *zenglendos* of today are young, autonomous, bold, brazen, and well-armed broad-daylight assassins, whose prime motivation for killing is banditry and profit. Typically, the *zenglendos* work alone or in pairs, usually off the backs of motorcycles though they have been known to push into crowded buses in order to assassinate on foot. In the few months leading up to February of 2000, two French nationals, an American tourist, and scores of Haitians were assassinated by *zenglendos*. It is a rising concern for both the citizenry and the state.

Though the divergence between the two forms are subtle, most Haitians recognize the distinctions. The fact that most *malfacteurs* and *zenglendos* are young, poor men has contributed to the popular association of street children with the violence. As such, a quiet civil sanctioning of the use of all necessary state force to quell the crisis has emerged. Enter the Anti-Gang Unit and the *arimaj*.

Anti-Gang is technically a sub-unit of the HNP, though it has always operated in Haiti with a certain degree of autonomy from them, in fact preceding the National Police in existence by at least seven decades. The unit is a descendant of the *Bureau de Recherche et d'Identification des Criminel* (BRIC), formed in 1921 in order to institutionalize the state's domestic intelligence efforts. Largely responsible for the investigation of criminal as well as political and 'social' crimes, the bureau was complimented in 1958 by the formation of the *Police des Moeurs*, the Morality Police, which used strongarm tactics against the poorer classes of Haiti in a bid to eliminate pimping, prostitution, and street begging. BRIC's name was formally changed to *Service d'Investigation et de Recherche Anti-Gang* (Anti-Gang) in the 1980s under Jean-Claude Duvalier, and since that time had been sharing its offices with the headquarters of the military police, until the Army's dissolution in 1995.

Today, Anti-Gang functions exclusively as a state weapon against civil violence, though as its name suggests, its primary targets are the *malfacteur* gangs. My conversations with Anti-Gang personnel have revealed that armed robbery has superceded drugs and carjacking as the chief activity of the gangs (these are crimes which are occasionally - though infrequently - committed by street children who have been recruited by local gang lieutenants). One Anti-Gang investigator has told me that street children are a "preoccupation" of the unit, due to the lack of parental control over street child behaviors. Specifically targeting the slum areas of Port-au-Prince, like Cité Soleil and Pòtay Leyogàn, Anti-Gang is primarily concerned with the abrupt termination of the youth gangs and the disorder that they are cited as causing. Predictably (given both state and civil sector frustration with the gangs), the clean-ups have been swift and brutal. The method is the *arimaj*, and the targets are primarily street children.

One doesn't often see the *arimaj* coming until the last minute, and that is exactly the point. Rapid and violent in execution, the *arimaj* is a blitzkrieg sweep into a targeted neighborhood. Sometimes employing tear gas and usually employing outright brutality, Anti-Gang screams into an area, sealing it off completely. The officers, clad in riot gear and gas masks, pile out of vehicles and beat and arrest those suspected of *malfacteur* or *zenglendo* activity. The Anti-Gang officer that I spoke with explained that a likely suspect is anyone "not doing anything" at the time of the *arimaj*, suggesting that idleness is probable cause for arrest and interrogation. If this criterion for suspicion was a standard for Anti-Gang method, then one might expect to find a high number of street children arrested during *arimaj*. And one in fact does.

The *Prison Juvénile-Sous-Fort*, the Juvenile Prison, is located in Port-au-Prince and is the only prison responsible for the incarceration of children in Haiti (though the prison is not *exclusively* dedicated to the detention of adolescent offenders, and in fact houses women inmates as well). At the time of my last visit to the prison in January 2000, 57 children between the ages of 13 and 17 years were being held there, and all but five of them were street boys. Though three of them were being held on homicide charges, the overwhelming majority of them were being detained on Anti-Gang charges of '*association avec malfacteurs*' – associating with gangsters. The warden explained to me, rather compassionately, that none of the children incarcerated there had been formally charged with a crime or handed an indictment of any kind. They are quite literally guilty until proven innocent. All that is needed for their imprisonment is an arrest report from the Anti-Gang Unit, which considers the living circumstances of street children – unsupervised and desperate – as probable cause for the assumption of their association with criminal elements.

Children who are arrested by Anti-Gang, especially street kids, have few civil rights. No lawyers or adults need be present for the questioning of adolescents, and there is no evidence needed for the

incarceration of juveniles; adolescent suspects have no right to be informed of the charges of arrest, no right to see a judge, and no right to a fixed and finite sentence. Nor are detained youths necessarily entitled to a trial (there is a single judge in the entire country responsible for hearing cases involving children, and no code of law specifically written for child offenders. As such, when adolescents do appear before a judge, it is typically within the adult court system). Most of the children held in the Juvenile Prison, the warden explained, were picked up on Anti-Gang *arimaj*. She pointed out that Anti-Gang needs no evidence to make arrests, nor do they need to inform the courts of the charges. Anti-Gang brings the street kids directly from the street to the prison.

On one of my visits to the prison, I saw among the incarcerated a street boy named Gregoire, whom I have known for six years. He told me that he was on the street in September of 1999 when Anti-Gang came in “like thunder” for an *arimaj*. Gregoire said that as he was backing away from an Anti-Gang officer who was beating another street boy, he was hit from behind by another officer who bound his wrists with plastic ties, and forced into an Anti-Gang vehicle. He was taken to National Police headquarters, where he was held in *ferme nwi* - overnight lockup - for 60 days. Since then, he had not seen a lawyer, had not been formally charged with a crime, and has not been given a sentence. By the time I spoke with him in January 2000, he had been incarcerated under these circumstances for four months. His case is typical of most street children held in the prison, and is indicative of the antagonistic stance that the Haitian state has taken toward street children.

In Haiti, much as in Brazil, the attitudes of both the civil society and the state have situated street children as dangerous social threats who are perceived as supernumerary nuisances and criminals. The popular (but poorly founded) association of *all* street children with *malfacteur* violence has elicited the social ire of a Port-au-Prince community that has isolated displaced youths as dangerous criminal agents. The criminalization of street children leads logically to the social denial of both civil and human rights that would otherwise be extended to them. This negative conception of human rights denies those who are perceived as non-citizens, living “outside” of social norms or civil law. A culture of violence persists reflexively here, combining the everyday violence of the street with legitimated and routinized police violence against those thus criminalized. The stubborn persistence of arbitrary police arrest and beatings in Haiti is a prototypical example of just such a culture - one in which government violence continues to be reproduced and sanctioned for the preservation of a socially-constructed perception of civil stability. We can see then what Nancy Scheper-Hughes has called “the workings of a hegemonic discourse on criminality/deviance/marginality and on the ‘appropriateness’ of police and state violence in which all segments of the population participate and to which they acquiesce, often contrary to their own class or race interests”.

We see in Haiti a social project of creating street children as a punishable category of youths, pushed to the margins of state and private responsibility. It is thus difficult for either the government or the citizenry to recognize any culpability in the social failure to extend civil and often human rights to these children. The tactics of *arimaj* serve as a state extension of the tacit and fearful will of the people, who see few alternatives for the termination of gang violence in Port-au-Prince. But the real danger here lies in Haiti’s failure to divorce itself from the paramilitary solution to its social ills. The Anti-Gang Unit is a uniquely undemocratic and mercenary institution which is persisting in the midst of a major and expensive project of democratization. It is a legacy of the old regimes, when power was guaranteed by the force of terror, and when it was easy to lose one’s self or one’s child to the violence of the state. Until such institutions are abandoned, and until the public and private sectors begin to take responsibility for the welfare of displaced children, it will still be easy to lose a child in Haiti.

Recommended Readings

Bernat, J. Christopher. 1999. "Children and the Politics of Violence in Haitian Context." Critique of Anthropology 19(2) 121-138.

Scheper-Hughes, Nancy. 1992. Death Without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Scheper-Hughes, Nancy and Sargent, Carolyn (eds.). 1998. Small Wars: The Cultural Politics of Childhood. Berkeley: University of California Press.