PROLOGUE

METHODOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE AND APPROACH IN AFRICAN URBAN STUDIES

K. LITTLE*

At the present time, less than 10 per cent of Africa's population lives in cities of 100,000 or more. On the other hand, since city growth in Africa seems now to be proceeding more rapidly than in other continents this seminar could hardly be more opportune.

Most of this urban growth is the result of migration from the countryside and, in consequence the populations resulting are ethnically very heterogeneous. Accra, for example contains representatives of some eighty different peoples and ethnic groups, and Dar-es-Salaam about a hundred. In such circumstances not only is the proportion of 'strangers' often larger than that of the town's indigenous inhabitants, but residence is frequently transient and impermanent. In fact, it was estimated some years ago that more than two-thirds of the inhabitants of Ghana's largest towns had been there for less than five years; and especially in parts of Central and East Africa large numbers of workers continuously oscillate between town and countryside. Since very many of these labour migrants are single or unattached men, the many towns receiving them often contain appreciably more adult males than adult females; and generally the proportion of older people is relatively small. Petty trading and local crafts are still a predominant feature of many such towns. But new techniques are gradually supplanting the older methods of production, and the concomitant growth of commerce as well as industrialisation increases the use of money and makes its possession essential. As a result a large proportion of the urban populations concerned depends for its livelihood upon the sale of labour and of services.

Since these new urban phenomena involve a species of both social and industrial revolution they are of special interest to social anthropologists and sociologists. True, the former discipline is best known for its study of rural culture. One of the reasons is that anthropology originated in speculation about exotic preliterate cultures. Non-literate societies of herdsmen, fishermen and hunters were considered culturally homogeneous enough to be studied as wholes. In consequence, many anthropologists consider that this is one good way in which to learn general principles of social organization. There is also spice and variety in the fact that certain aspects of such cultures, such as African kinship, usually involve social organizations more complex than those of contemporary Euro-North America. Analysis of these, therefore, calls for considerable *finesse*, and so some anthropologist probably derive the same kind of intellectual pleasure from disentangling, say, African rules of marriage and descent, as do enthusiastic mathematicians from algebraic formulae.

In effect, therefore, although anthropologists have studied African peoples for apparently different sets of reasons, their general orientation tends to overlap. Thus, while one group has remained concerned primarily with the recording and analysis of traditional systems, some of

---

* Professor of Urban African Studies, University of Edinburgh.

their work deals with the effects of contemporary change. For example, the well-known book, *African Political Systems*, contains sections on modern rule, and one of its editors, Meyer Fortes, has written quite extensively about social change in Ghana in addition to his *Web of Kinship* and other studies of the Tallensi. (See references cited). But another group of anthropologists, have largely focussed on modern social trends and developments. Without exception, however these writers have also perceived that the new problems cannot be satisfactorily elucidated without taking fully into account their traditional background. Consequently, although there are important senses in which the latter students of modern African phenomena have broken fresh ground, it would be entirely wrong to suppose that they are basically divided from their colleagues. The main difference is in methodology because of the need now—inadequately served by the functional-structuralist approach alone—to deal effectively with highly dynamic factors.

Among the several early pioneers of 'urban' methodology, Hoernlé and Hellman, Gluckman and Godfrey Wilson, merit special attention. (See references) Their contributions are important because of the influence during the 1940s of theories of acculturation, including the idea of social change as a simple result of clashing cultures. What the above-mentioned anthropologists showed, instead, was that the effects of so-called culture contact are no different in kind from change within a single society. (See Wilson, 1940:12)

The revolutionary implications of the kinds of changes taking place for methodology took some time to penetrate because traditionally anthropological field-work is based essentially on the direct and intensive study of small groups. This made it customary for social phenomena not specifically earmarked as 'traditional' or 'indigenous' to be either ignored or placed in some special category labelled 'modern change' or 'culture contact.' In other words, interest being centred on African culture *per se* the aim was to isolate traditional society as the unit of study. Research in the urban field, on the other hand, meant enlarging the field of enquiry and extending it beyond the single local community and even ethnic group. It necessitated investigations being conducted in terms of a conceptual framework wide enough to comprehend, in addition to African town dwellers and wage-earners themselves, the operation of Christian missions, mining companies, schools, merchantile firms, and so on.

An important consideration in any study carried out in African towns is the heterogeneity of their populations; that there is rarely any simple system of social norms. Over inheritance, over marriage, and over many other institutions essential to community life, notions of law and justice differ and there are few common bases for agreement. Nor can such civic institutions as these towns possess necessarily give the lead when for their substantial migratory population the place in which they do their business is not a permanent home. They may own property, may make repeated visits, spend part of the year there, but without acquiring any feelings of attachment. Their social self remains in some other part of the country—among their lineage people in the place where they were born (Little, 1965: 86–87).

Moreover the African town serves various economic and other purposes which merely express the town's position as a function of a wider encompassing system. We mention this because the town being but a secondary phenomenon, it is not from the town but from the system encompassing it that vitality, force, and impetus primarily come. This means—and it is a fundamental consideration—that it is not the town itself which generates change. The town itself is not an innovator, but the place where change is initiated and the medium through which change passes.

The reason for the latter is that it is in the town, especially the primate city, that are concentrated the State's principal economic, cultural, educational and technical resources and it is in the towns and the urban areas that the new forms of life and labour crystallise and take shape. As Balandier (1956) has pointed out, the town, by serving as a field for wider and fuller contact acts as a kind of 'laboratory' for the formation of new cultural patterns (See also Breese, 1966:41). Nor does the role of the urban centre stop at its own boundaries. On the contrary, there is a constant coming and going of traders, and as well as the movement of migrants, townspeople frequently visit or are visited by rural relatives. In consequence, a far stretching network of social and other ties connect the town with its hinterland, and so transmits the new ideas and practices acquired by the migrants to the countryside. Instead of being confined to the town they are diffused over a much wider area. The result, as Southall has aptly pointed out, is that the town is the 'pace-maker' for the wider society: "it is there that change proceeds furthest and fastest and economic and class considerations most successfully supercede those of tribal origin" (1961: 192). This implies that the alterations taking place in the town itself are radical in type. The changes rippling out from it, on the other hand are, as a rule, merely organisational in character. This means that the town is the place *par excellence* where investigations of movement and change can most profitably be made. Much of the movement and change are of people from the country areas who, very often, are unused to town ways and have previously been organised in village communities, clans, chiefdoms and so on. Residence in the town introduces them to new habits and customs. And, depending upon circumstances and to a varying extent, they also group themselves in different ways, align themselves differently, and for different alliances.

The term I apply to this process is 'urbanisation,' meaning that people acquire material and non-material elements of culture, behavioural patterns and ideas, that originate in or are distinctive of the city. In other words, rural persons moving to the city, or visiting it become 'urbanised' to the extent that they acquire urban characteristics of behaviour and thought, or material objects which through possession or use affect their conduct and ideas. Similarly, the farm or village residents may become 'urbanised' as the culture of the city is conveyed to the rural community and thus integrated into the ideational and behavioural patterns of the residents (Gist and Fava, 1963:63-64). The basic processes of urbanisation thus apply to both rural and city dwellers, and these processes being social means that structural as well as cultural factors are involved. This is because the acquisition of 'urban' characteristics is essentially a matter of social relations and cultural practices being taken in conjunction (e.g. Mayer 1961). To put it more simply, the individual taking an urban - directed step selects new companions and friends as well as new habits.

In 'urbanisation,' therefore, we have a concept which arguably comprehends what is mainly involved in African contemporary movement and change. Unlike the term 'modernisation,' 'urbanisation' takes care of structural as well as cultural factors, but our use of it requires discussion and qualification in one or two important ways. In the first place, the term 'urbanisation' implies a movement from something regarded as 'rural.' Those of us who are European, are used to making this kind of distinction because we conceive of 'town' and 'village' as separate things. But conceptualisation on these lines is not made in every culture and it is irrelevant, in fact, to a certain type of African urbanism found in Nigeria. Yoruba towns there, for instance, are cities inhabited by farmers; and the *'ilu'* or nucleated settlement concerned does not stop short at the mud walls enclosing the town. It extends into the farmlands beyond, and so the *'ilu'*

boundaries are co-terminous, in a sense, with those of the further plots farmed by members of the residential unit within the clustered settlement itself. Conceptually in other words the Yoruba city is not distinguished from its farming hinterland; the whole complex is to be seen rather as a unit radiating out from a core consisting of the *oba* (king) and council (Krapf—Askari, 1969: 25-26). Yoruba towns are often large in size, but the Mende of Sierra Leone have a very similar settlement pattern. This is based on a local group of kinsmen recognised under the expression *kuwui*, meaning literally 'compound'. In a limited sense, *kuwui* is simply an aggregate of individual farming households occupying a particular locality; but, sociologically speaking, the Mende town and the countryside around it really form a single system of kinship. The town is made up of many separate localities containing the compounds of its inhabitants, and with each "urban" locality is associated one or more "rural" localities, comprising village and farmlands (Little, 1967:101-105). In other words, among both these peoples there is a combination of town and villages. This constitutes a social and political entity and is the actual unit of settlement. The African inhabitants concerned recognise social differences between people whose residence is in the town and those residing in the "bush." But village and town do not constitute a polarity, and so there is no rural-urban continuum.

Nor, even in the 'modern' town, is there necessarily a high degree of rural-urban discontinuity. True, one of the most telling criticisms made of Malinowski is this apparent failure to take urban systems into account and both Mitchell (1966) and Gluckman (1949) have pertinently drawn attention to the danger of interpreting urban situations in terms of tribal culture. Custom and values in tribal areas, these writers have pointed out, are part of a particular social context and so cannot be compared with their counterparts in urban areas, where they fall into a different context. Gluckman and Mitchell also stress that both town and country are constantly affected by intercommunication between them. The latter conclusions were drawn largely from the highly industrialised conditions of mining towns in Central Africa to which many of the African workers concerned migrated from rural villages a thousand and more miles away. In West Africa, not only has opposition been less sharp between Africans and Europeans, but many of the towns arbitrarily termed 'modern' are not the direct product of industrialisation. Some of them—as already pointed out, existed as capitals of kingdoms. Consequently there is less difference socoilogically speaking between towns and countryside. Many of the people coming to reside in the urban centres are already acquainted with town ways and so move into communities already familiar in some respect to the social environment left behind (Banton, 1965:131-136; Stryker, a 1968:11). Indeed, both because travellers and migrants often remain 'encapsulated' in *zongos* and because of vestiges of traditional urbanism, there is a tendency for whole sections of the 'modern' West African town to be characteristically more 'rural' than 'urban.' This is partly because vestiges of traditional urbanism continue to survive and, there are also *zongos* to 'encapsulate' visiting strangers and travellers. In addition, as Fortes has pointed out (op. cit., pp. 10-11) the social and cultural identity of some of the immigrants themselves may be preserved by such internal forces as a distinctive language or religion and even enhanced by the group's defensive reaction to the values of the 'host' society. Mayer's study (1961) of the "Red" Xhosa provides a well known example; and the importance of the religious factor has been demonstrated in Butcher's unpublished study of Fulbe immigrants in Sierra Leone.

Yet, there is a still further point. Parts of the West African countryside are scenes of considerable economic activity, and so situations and problems ordinarily associated with urban

life may arise in areas usually thought of as 'rural.' This happens when commercial pressure from the exogenous forces referred is such as to render the countryside's main agricultural centres functionally as important as towns themselves. It follows therefore that before employing the model of urbanisation proposed we need to be clear about the kind of reality actually involved. Caution is required because typologically, as Southall has pointed out, there may be distinguished two broad categories of town. On the one hand, is the old established, slowly growing town and on the other the new population of 'mushroom' growth. With those of the first category which Southall calls type A, must also be included many of the smaller towns which though not necessarily old, may have grown quite fast and also retained strong links with agriculture and the subsistence economy of the countryside. Southall goes on also to show that towns of type A are typically characterised by a more or less indigenous population core of considerable homogeneity, which may provide a scale of status to which immigrants from a distance must conform. But there is a continuous gradation between short and long term migrants in relation to their economic status and distance from home, though local migrants are particularly important. Occupations are very diverse, in a setting which is predominantly clerical and commercial rather than industrial. While an extensive and corporate kinship structure rarely operates, conditions are sufficiently flexible to permit some ethnic or kinship concentration. The newer centres on the other hand, consist in the extreme case of a totally immigrant population, which may to a considerable extent be of very distant origin.

The scheme proposed by Southall is useful because implicit in it are the conditions noted above. These are (*a*) that there tend to be sections of a town's population that in respect of cultural characteristics can often be seen as more 'rural' than 'urban;' and (*b*) that in some circumstances problems ordinarily labelled, 'urban' arise in what would generally be described as a 'rural' area. Southall's classification also makes the further relevant point that not every settlement displaying 'urban' characteristics is necessarily large in population.

We have therefore, in 'urban' terms a highly complex situation which has taxed the ingenuity of numerous scholars. However, the salient consideration is fairly obvious and it is that in this contemporary African context conventional indices and distinctions provide an inadequate basis for empirical purposes. For example, Wirth's well-known minimal definition of the city is, "a relatively large, dense and permanent settlement." This, however, is irrelevant to the actual social reality. The use of 'urbanization' as a concept for empirical purposes should be confined to nucleated settlements of a specific kind. These would be settlements whose populations were ethnically and tribally heterogeneous and relatively transient: usually adult males would preponderate numerically over adult females and the younger age groups over the former. Also, a relatively larger proportion of this type of settlements population would depend for its livelihood upon the sale of either labour or services. In terms therefore of these criteria settlements such as Accra, Kampala, and Dar-es Salaam would obviously be included; but places like Oshogbo, Ilorin and Abeokuta would not. Each of the latter settlements has more than 200,000 inhabitants but it lacks sufficient of the criteria required for our proposed methodological purposes.

In fact, we suggest, there are perhaps three advantages to this kind of model. Firstly, it makes possible characterisation of the changes taking place in language that is, culturally speaking, relatively 'neutral.' This is useful because although we may speak of urbanism existing as a specific way of life in some developing regions, the above discussion has shown that in much of Sub-Saharan Africa conditions are as yet too fluid to be definitively explained in similar terms.

Not only has one to allow for variation and divergence in the cultural and structural changes taking place, but dogmatism about their direction is unwise. Although the present state of many societies is known, the most one can say about the conditions to which they are moving is that the movement itself involves change of a radical order. Since these processes involve, on the whole, exchanging smaller for large settlement patterns we have chosen to speak about 'urbanisation;' but this is as far as we need go.

The second possible advantage of the conceptual framework is that it takes care of the nature as well as the speed of urban growth. The latter, as indicated above, is often very rapid and so it may be of relevance that such and such an urban centre has doubled or trebled its population in the course of a single decade. What, however does not automatically follow is that urban increase even as striking as this necessarily has special sociological significance. Much will depend upon the demographic factors involved, including whether immigration is the main reason, and the ethnic composition of the immigrants. Do they mostly have, as in the 'Yoruba' city of Lagos, the same affiliation as most of the 'indigenous' inhabitants; or do the migrants come from a variety of peoples whose homelands are five hundred or more miles away? Questions of this kind are important because the situation itself is more dynamic than elsewhere, including the northern part of the continent. Consequently south of the Sahara, as we have stressed, it is the sociology of urban growth, not urbanism *per se*, that captures attention.

Thirdly, the conceptual framework to be employed is defined in terms of a consistent and uniform set of factors. This, it is hoped, will facilitate the making of relevant comparisons of social change in different regions of sub-Saharan Africa.

The last mentioned point brings us finally to African urban studies itself. A major focus of the present seminar is the urban family—and in a given investigation it might be discovered that households of this kind are, for the most part, conjugally-based. An appropriate conceptual framework for the necessary analysis would then be needed and this might be found in the urbanisation process. For instance, such a household's position in the economy might be seen as a specialisation of the traditional extended family's more generalised role, and hence as a function of the urban social system. This formulation might, in turn, pave the way for what in many urban families of the nuclear type is of crucial importance—the conjugal role-relationship itself. Here again, since urbanisation involves the acquisition of new companions and friends as well as new standards and values, the spouses' individual social networks might be usefully examined in such terms. This would enable the relative degree of the man and the wife's respective 'town-rootedness' to be assessed and thus throw light upon a frequent reason for marital discord-differences in the spouses's role expectations of each other.

So much for methodology in a specific problem; but operations on a wider scale might also be envisaged because African social trends and changes need to be comprehended in general terms. Take again, for example, the family of which studies are being made in a number of countries but under different conditions and in differing circumstances. Naturally, all such investigations are welcome, but can one necessarily assume that what is learned about the urban family's structure in say, Kenya, has the same kind of sociological significance as findings from say, Nigeria? Both studies were made, let us suppose, among teachers or civil servants; but if the one investigation was carried out in, for instance, Nairobi, and the other in a 'traditional' town, a satisfactory basis for comparison might be lacking.

The moral, therefore, is obvious, that to set up a uniform experiment on a sufficiently wide scale would, in ordinary terms, require the kind of money that only the Ford Foundation or a highly enlightened oil-millionaire could afford! Nevertheless, a start might be made if prospective students of family structure and those organising their studies were prepared to be constructive about the methodological implications of such research. The kind of view point I am advocating is not only whether a particular study of family relationships in, say, Kumasi, has scholarly merit and is original in content, but what is its contribution to general theories of society?

It is for this reason that I have emphasised methodology. True, in African urban studies there is every need for more and more documentation. But we also need to see the "wood" as well as the "trees" and this requires the kind of systematic approach that only agreement about methodology can produce. I hope therefore that this seminar, while not ignoring differences in view point, will concentrate on the common ideas and concepts that bring us methodologically most closely together.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

ARDENER E.	1961	"Social and Demographic Problems of the Southern Cameroons Plantation Area" In Aidan Southall (ed.) *Social Change in Modern Africa.* Oxford University Press for International African Institute.
ARDENER E. W.	1962	*Divorce and Fertility* Oxford University Press.
ALIHAN, M. A.	1938	*Social Ecology*, Chicago.
BASCOM, W. R.	1955	"Urbanisation among the Yoruba." *American Journal of Sociology*, 60.
BASCOM, W. R.	1963	"The Urban African and his World," *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines*, 4 (14).
BANTON, M. P.	1957	*West African City: A Study of Tribal Life in Freetown* London.
BANTON, M. P.	1965	"Social Alignment and Identity in a West African City" in Hilda Kuper, (ed.) *Urbanization and Migration in West Africa*, Berkeley, University of California Press.
BALANDIER, GEORGE	1956	"Urbanism in West and Central Africa" in *Social Implications of Industrialisation South of the Sahara.* Paris U.N.E.S.C.O.
BUTCHER, D. A. P.	1964	The Role of the Fulbe in the Urban Life and Economy of Lunsar, Sierra Leone. Unpublished doctoral dissertion, Edinburgh University.
DAVIES, KINGSLEY	1968	"The Urbanisation of the Human Population" in Sylvia Fleis Fava (ed.) *Urbanism in World perspective.*
FIRTH, R.	1954	"Social Organisation and Social Change" *Presidential Address*, Royal Anthropological Institute, *Journal of The Royal Anthropological Institute.* Vol. 84 Pts. 1 and 11—Jan.—Dec.
FIRTH, R.	19 9	*Social Change in Tikopia*, London, Allen.
FORTES, M.	1938	Unwin "Culture Contact as a Dynamic Process in Methods of Study of Culture Contact in Africa, *Africa* Vols. VII, VIII & IX.
	1945	*The Dynamics of Clanship among the Tallensi* O.U.P.
	1947	Ashanti Survey 1945-6 *Geographical Journal* Vol. LX.
	1949	*The Web of Kinship Among The Tallensi* O.U.P.
	1971	"Some Aspects of Migration and Mobility in Ghana" *Journal of Asian and African Studies* Vol VI No 1.

FORTES, M. & EVANS PRITCHARD (eds) 1940   *African Political Systems*. O.U.P.

GIST, N. P. & SYLVIA F. FAVA   1964   *Urban Society*, New York Crowell.

GLUCKMAN, M.   1949   "Malinowski's Sociological Theories" *Rhodes-Livingstone Papers*. No. 16.

1958   "Analysis of a Social Situation in Modern Zululand" *Rhodes-Livingston Papers*, No. 28, Manchester.

1960   "Tribalism in Modern British Central Africa," *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines*, No. 1.

1961   "Anthropological Problems Arising from the African Industrial Revolution" in Aidan Southall (ed.) *Social Change in Modern Africa*, London, O.U.P.

HELLMAN, E.   1935   "Native Life in Johannesburg Slum Yard" *Africa* 8.

HUTCHINSON, J.   1968   "Reflections on African Development"— *Presidential Address to The African Studies Association of The United Kingdom.*

IKE, CHUKUEMEKA   1970   *The Naked Gods*, London, Harwill.

KRAPF-ASKARI, E.   1969   *Yoruba Towns and Cities*, Oxford, Clarendo.

LITTLE, K.   1952   "Social Anthropology: "The Approaches to Fieldwork" *Man* 261, November.

1965   *West African Urbanisation*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

1967   *The Mende of Sierra Leone*, London, Routledge.

MALINOWSKI, B.   1938   Introductory Essay on the Anthropology of Changing African Culture. Methods of Study of Culture contact in Africa, *Africa* Vols. VII, VIII & IX.

1949   *The Dynamics of Cultural Change* (ed.) P. M. Kaberrv London

MAYER, P.   1961   *Townsmen or Tribesmen: Conservation and the Process of Urbanisation in a South African Town*, Oxford University Press.

MITCHELL, J. C.   1956   *The Kalela Dance, Rhodes-Livingstone Papers* No. 27, Manchester, Manchester University Press.

MITCHELL, J. C.   1951   "A Note on the Urbanisation of Africans on the Copperbelt" *Rhodes-Livingstone Journal* 12.

1954   *African Urbanisation in Ndola and Luanshya* Rhodes-Livingstone Communication No. 6 Rhodes-Livingstone Institute.

	1966	"Theoretical Orientations in African Urban Studies" in M. Banton (ed.) *The Social Anthropology of Complex Societies*. A. S. A. Monographs, 4 London, Tavistock.
	1970	"Race, Class and Status in South Central Africa" In Arthur Tuden and Leonard Plotnicoy, (eds.) *Social Stratification in Africa*, New York, Free Press of Glence.
MITCHELL J. C. & A. L. ESPSEIN	1965	"Occupational prestige and Social Status Among Urban African in Northern Rhodesia" *Africa* 29.
MITHCELL J. C. & J. R. H. SHAUL	1965	An Approach to the Measurements of Commitment To Urban Residence" in George J. Snowball, (ed.) *Science and Medicine in Central Africa* Oxford Pergamon Press.
NADEL, S. F.	1942	*A Black Byzantium*, Oxford, University Press.
RICHARDS, A. I.	1963	Foreword to P. C. W. Gutkind, *The Royal Capital of Buganda*, The Hague.
SCHAPERA, I.	1938	"Contact between European and Native in South Africa and in Bechuanaland." *Methods of Study of Culture Contact in Africa*. Africa Vols. VII, VIII and IX.
SOUTHALL, AIDAN	1961	Introduction in A. W. Southall (ed.) *Social Change in Modern Africa, Oxford:* Oxford University Press.
STEEL, R. W.	1961	"The Towns of Tropical Africa" in K. M. Barbour and R. M. Prothero (eds.) *Essays of African Population*.
STRYKER, RICHARD E.	1968	"Modernisation and the Atrophy of Public Life" African Urban Notes, Vol. III No. 1
VAN VELSEN, J.	1961	"Labour Migration as a Positive Factor in the Continuity of Tonga Tribal Society" in A. W. Southall (ed.) *Social Change in Modern Africa*, Oxford University Press for International African Institute.
WILSON, GODFREY	1941	*Economics of Detribalisation in Northern Rhodesia Pts. 1 & 2 Rhodes-Livingstone Papers*, Nos. 5 & 6.
WIRTH, LOUIS	1938	"Urbanisation as a Way of Life" *American Journal of Sociology* XLIV (July).